Takuma has one month before Akida solves the dimensional puzzle which Aether has trapped him in. The only way Takuma will be able to defend himself when the time comes is if he can unlock a new form a magic on a scale above any of the existing ones in this world: meaning he must combine the magical and psychic arts using the mysterious teachings of the Beastmen tribes; one of which has been taken over by a dictatorship forcing them into slave labor, and seeks the aid of powerful independent factions in exchange for ancient wisdom. It is what it sounds like: a bunch of ***Convoluted Magic Bullshit****.*

Chapter One: The Psychic Monastery

Every autistic person in the world of Einjol had sensed the moment when Takuma first showed up there--as well as the moment when he'd exerted the current full extent of his psychic powers. After all, each of them had a portal inside of their brains connected to the post-dimensional powers of the Upper Deck Gods. Any major distortions in the dimensionality of Einjol would send a recognizable shiver through their bodies--known to them because a similar feeling would tingle over the skin whenever they used their own powers.

Psychic Magicians, as they're known throughout the country, are able to connect their dimension of residence with other, similar dimensions with slight differences, and then bring those differences into their own dimension. Assuming that every conceivable possibility exists within its own dimension, this means that a psychic can make any possibility into the truth--so long as it is within the scope of their power, and the range of nearby candidate dimensions. For instance, if a psychic wanted to make an apple appear on a table, they would need both enough power to open a dimensional rift large enough and for long enough to move an apple through, and for a universe in which that apple exists in that space to be close enough to theirs on the beltway of parallel dimensions.

Sariah Savors was strong enough that she'd once brought an object into her dimension which hadn't resembled anything previously existing therein. It had been an amorphous blue creature, barely larger than a pumpkin, with a big goofy smile on its face, that tingled to the touch and seemed to hunger for flesh. Ordinarily, it would've been nearly impossible for a psychic to conjure an object which they weren't familiar with; but Sariah had independently thought up the idea of this creature, and then by chance had been lucky enough that the same thing actually existed within the range of her accessible dimensions. Having realized that she didn't want to have to take care of the thing, though, she'd set it loose into the wild.

At age 17, Sariah had become the top pupil of the Psychic Monastery, buried deep in the forests of Boromir's Western countryside. Even though practitioners of all ages trained there--many of whom would hone their psychic channeling for decades--none could live up to the enormity of the girl's power. Moreover, she was entrancingly beautiful, with long black hair cut in bangs across the top of her eyebrows, and a tall, slender frame, whose breasts and thighs asked which you'd rather rest your head upon. For a while she had been routinely courted by any man with blood running through his lower body--and just as systematically, each had given up on scaling the massive wall of her autism.

Over the past year, it had become apparent to the head council of psychic monks that there was nothing left for anyone to teach Sariah; she'd ostensibly outperformed any other known psychic in the country, and was only becoming more alienated ans estranged among her peers--a fact which she either hadn't picked up on herself, or simply didn't seem to care about. As such, the arrival on Einjol of an even-more-powerful psychic warrior destined to save the universe from the galaxy-chewing Yog-Sothoth represented an excellent opportunity. The Monastery sought to assist and monitor Takuma on his journey--and if anyone could expand Sariah's understanding of the psychic arts, it would have to be him.

A meeting was called in the monastery's central courtyard, in front of a ten-foot painted statue of a blue-haired, scantily-glad, cape-wearing goddess. Standing at its foot was a short, bald man dressed in simple robes--the head monk, serendipitously named Monk. Before him, seated on her knees and wearing a red one-piece body-tight China dress with a slit down the legs and gold hem, was Sariah, staring blankly into the old man's face as she'd many times been corrected for failing to do.

"I trust you recall the major dimensional disturbance which took place one month ago," Monk rasped in his gravelly old serious voice.

"Why?" Sariah asked without a moment's hesitation. Already Monk was on the back foot.

"Why *what?"*

"Why do you trust that I recall the major dimensional disturbance which took place one month ago?"

Monk could already feel the blood rushing to his temples. Every conversation with this girl was like navigating a labyrinth.

"Because you were at the meeting which we held immediately afterward."

"I was not at any such meeting." Sariah seemed to be lying, but Monk knew that it wasn't in this girls' repertoire to lie--only to fundamentally misunderstand.

"You were at the meeting to discuss the arrival of the hero whom our Goddess summoned to battle Yog-Sothoth, were you not?"

"Indeed, I was at that meeting."

"That is the meeting to which I was referring."

"Ah. In that case, you have misspoken, as the meeting to which you're referring took place 51,943 minutes ago--simplifiable to 36.071528 days ago, which is longer than the number of days in any of the months observed by our monestary's calendars. If you were referring to the Reinbul calendar, then you were only inaccurate by a single day."

Monk had closed his eyes and pressed his forefinger and thumb into his temples while he let the girl go on, not daring to interrupt and splinter the conversation further. He was going to need to drop as many formalities as possible and stay succinct if he wanted to escape this interaction before the afternoon.

"I'll be straight with you, Sariah-"

"Question!"

This was another of Sariah's quirks--in her quest for perfect clarity in all interactions, she was known to suddenly shout "question!" before asking for clarification.

"Do you mean to imply that until now you have been *'bent'* with me, *'gay'* with me*, 'unclear'* with me, or *'dishonest'* with me? Or, is your use of the word 'straight' outside of the core conventional definitions of the word?"

"Look--"

"I *am* looking, sir."

"Please be quiet until I am finished speaking."

Monk was starting to lose his temper in a way that he wouldn't have thought himself capable of before he met this girl. Sariah did as she was told. Oftentimes, she felt her conversations ended with a lack of real understanding of what the other person had been trying to say, as her line of questioning would be interrupted in this way--but by now she'd gotten used to this as the way interactions worked. She would simply do whatever she was told until instructed later on how her understanding of the previous interaction had seemingly strayed from its intent.

"As an envoy of the Psychic Monastery, you are to seek out and meet with the man whom the goddess has brought to our world; and then, *if possible,* to join and assist him on his quest. You are to offer him anything which the monastery could provide to that end. You are also to *learn* from observing his use of psychic powers, and to submit *written reports* to the monastery every fortnight on the status of your journey. Is that *understood?"*

Sariah did not respond.

"I am finished speaking."

"QUESTION!"

"Yes, Sariah."

"Is there any reason that it would *not* be possible for me to join and assist him on his quest?"

Monk considered answering that the hero may not find her useful, or may simply find communication with her too frustrating and send her away--but it seemed like that conversation could spiral out of control, so he skipped it.

"There shouldn’t be."

"Then I will go."

And with that, Sariah got straight to her feet and started walking towards the front gate of the monastery without second thought.

"Wait a moment--don't you want to say goodbye to anyone or make any provisions?"

Sariah stopped, but did not turn around to speak.

"Within the scope of my powers are no less than *375* dimensions in which all of my things are exactly where I left them. If I need anything--" as she spoke, she held up a hand by her shoulder, and then an apple suddenly popped into existence above her palm, "I can *move* it." Catching the apple, she took a bite and glanced over her shoulder as she started walking. "I have said goodbye to *you* already."

As Sariah grew distant, Monk was left wondering whether it was grammatically sensical to say goodbye to someone in the form of claiming to have already said it.

Chapter Two: Lost Woods

For the last two days Sariah had been wandering the forest entertaining herself. Unbeknownst to her, Monk had simply assumed from her sudden departure that she must have known where she was going using some power greater than his. Unbeknownst to him, she had only the vague instinct that the dimensional displacement happened *somewhere in the Southwest,* and no idea how to get there. Since she hadn't been given any time limit on reaching her destination, she thought it simply didn't matter.

On the first day of her journey, she had come upon a small boar in a clearing and been completely entranced by it. For half an hour she'd continually caused food to appear in front of it, waited for it to take a bite, and then moved the food across the clearing and watched the boar move to that spot before repeating the process. The fact that the boar would predictably trot all over the clearing without question amused her greatly. Once the pig was full and couldn't be manipulated any more, she simply tracked down another animal and repeated the process for the better part of the afternoon.

When dusk fell, she imported a lantern from her room back at the monastery and used it to navigate until she was tired--and then *moved* her pillow and blanket so she could sleep in the very same clearing, only an hour's walk away from her starting point.

As simple as she made it seem, *moving* these objects was actually an extremely advanced psychic technique. Ordinarily, a psychic could only conjure things into existence which already existed in that space in another dimension--however, to actually move something from another dimension into a different location in your own dimension required exact knowledge of that object's spacial placement in the original dimension. While there were no shortage of dimensions whose differences from the current one were infinitesimal, every time an object left one of those dimensions it became extremely divergent, and much harder to interact with a second time. If an average mage were to look at an apple on a table, and then conjure an identical apple into their hand from a dimension in which that apple had been in the same place, then the universe wherein the apple suddenly disappeared and the one in which it had suddenly appeared in the person's hand would instantly become different enough to leave the range of an average psychic's available pool of dimensions.

However, in any universe close enough to hers to be taken from, Sariah would also be taking things from other nearby dimensions--and if she pulled her pillow from a neighboring dimension, then some other dimension's version of her had also taken the pillow from hers. If all nearby universes had therefore taken one-another's pillows, then dimensions in which those pillows continued to exist would instantly deplete. While there might be enough nearby dimensions which continued to use the pillow in the exact same way from that point forward that they could continue to trade between one-another, the constant jumbling of dimensional organization meant that if she were to put the pillow back into another dimension, that one might not reliably stay close enough to pull it back--she would instead be pulling from yet another dimension which had remained mostly similar to hers, and eventually grow farther and farther from universes in which the pillow could reliably be found in the same place.

Psychic scholars in the monastery would most likely never become concerned about this, as it was widely believed that the range of available universes to interact with were always the one least divergent from the current one--meaning that whichever universes were closest to

yours would always be the ones in which things had, up to that point, continued to be exactly the same as they were in your current one; however, none of them had been capable of the level of experimentation and understanding which Sariah could achieve,which she hadn't the capacity to digestibly explain herself.

In actuality, a psychic's mind was attuned not to whichever universes were closest to their own, but to all of those occupying a specific *frequency.* To use FM radio as a metaphor, if a psychic was tuned in to channel 94.1, then they could interact with other nearby dimensions which were tuned into that same frequency. Some universes, after all, might be exactly the same for the entire lifetime of the person experiencing them, but eventually become dramatically different millions of years later. In a fourth-dimensional sense, these universes would be very far apart--but because psychics experience their universe on the axis of time, it would seem as though the universes are constantly shuffling around based on changes as they occur. In reality, all of the history of all dimensions exists simultaneously in the fourth dimension, and the positions of different dimensions remain consistent--but if two universes are exactly the same at a specific moment in time, then they will be vibrating at the same *frequency* in that time frame, allowing psychics to communicate with them, provided that they aren't too far away.

If a psychic lost access to *all* of the dimensions which both shared their frequency and were physically nearby in the multiverse, then they may lose their psychic abilities entirely--although no one on record had ever fully exhausted their possibilities. Some mages would find their powers becoming spotty and unreliable if overused, though, which had caused the Monastery to train psychics not to overuse their powers and to focus on understanding them better rather than improving through frequent usage. Given the scope of her abilities, however, Sariah didn't seem to care.

On the second morning of her journey, Sariah had correctly predicted the exact location of the head monk's breakfast in a nearby universe and brought it to her own--a delicious pork omelet prepared by the monastery's head cook, which her version of Monk was certainly enjoying at the same moment--while the alternate version diverged into a frequency outside her range of communication.

Feeling her clothes had become uncomfortably dirty, she then summoned another outfit from her room, along with a huge backpack to put away all the things she'd summoned and ceased to use; and then she tried to summon the bucket which was usually sitting atop the well back at the monastery--however, in this and all nearby dimensions, the bucket had happened to be placed on the ground beside the well today. After a dozen attempts only capturing the air where the bucket might've been, she gave up and decided to go looking for a lake.

In order to accomplish this, she wandered around in search of large animals which she could follow, eventually noticing a wild dog and tailing it on its way to the water source. Sure enough, it didn't take long to stumble on a perfectly clear, beautifully fresh lake occupying the space of about an acre in the middle of the forest. The water was surprisingly warm from basking in the summer sun, so of course Sariah had no reservations about stripping naked and wading into the heart of the lake.

Minutes later, she emerged back onto the lake's shore with seven leeches hugging her arms, thighs, and abdomen. With a single psychic pulse, all of the obnoxious insects were blasted off and into pieces.

Attacks such as this, which simply involved displacing the atmosphere of your own dimension with that of a nearby one, were some of the least disruptive or difficult psychic skills--all one had to do was to grab some nearby gasses from another universe and move them to the location you wanted attacked. The removal of air rarely caused enough divergence for the universe to leave the mage's frequency range.

Sariah had just donned a new white t-shirt which she tied into a side-knot at the bottom, and then finished the second knot on her pair of red side-tie panties when she suddenly heard a cry for help pierce the atmosphere; the shaky voice of a young girl somewhere just out of sight in the woods. Sariah didn't hesitate to slip on her wooden clogs and head off in its direction.

After just half a minute darting through the forest in the direction of the ongoing cries for help, Sariah halted at the sight of a huge fireball suddenly tearing through the brush for half a second before crashing into something, followed by a pained roar. It was just close enough for her to tell that an enormous bear was now flailing about, trying to extinguish its tufts of burning fur, continuing in pursuit of whatever had attacked it.

"HEEELP!!" the voice was clearer now and nearby--and soon its owner came into the clearing just before Sariah. It was indeed a small girl--dark-skinned with fluffy white hair and an unmistakable pair of goat horns spiraling from the top of her head. All of her clothes were puffy and blue with a grey-white trim, as was the color of her cloak, and she carried a short oaken staff with an amber gem at the head. She was barrelling directly toward Sariah, with the angry bear merely a few meters behind.

As soon as the small girl reached Sariah, her head crashing into the underside of the taller girls' breasts, she clung to her, shouting, *"PLEASE PLEASE SAVE ME, PLEASE!"* Sariah didn't have a choice, nor did she give it a second thought--with no effort whatsoever, she displaced the air in the middle of the bear's neck, and its head popped off--the body slipping and tumbling to the ground on its own momentum. The small girl stared in horrified awe as the head of the bear came rolling nearly to her feet. Tears in her eyes, she buried her face in the psychic's tummy, continually crying and thanking her. Sariah, unsure how to react, simply stared down blankly at her for a moment, and then spoke.

"I have to put on the rest of my clothes," she said.

***

On their way back to the lakeside where Sariah had left her things, the young goat-horned girl had introduced herself as Gilibit Oreander, or Gil for short. She'd gone on continually thanking Sariah for her survival, but her sloppy crying had given way to an almost unnaturally cheery disposition over the course of their short walk.

"Hey, so--that thing you did to the bear back there--you must be *REALLY* strong, right??" Gil asked excitedly as Sariah pulled on a bizarre pair of open-bottomed purple pants and a matching jacket, whose sleeves she rolled up to the elbows.

"Proportionally to other psychic users, I am indeed very adept--however, to determine if I am indeed 'really strong,' I would require a disambiguated meaning of the word 'strong,' as well as knowledge of the scale being used for comparison."

"Do you mind if I ask where you're headed to, *miss--?"*

"I do not mind if you ask." Sariah had missed all of the cues in the younger girl's statement. Gil thought for a second before asking her next question.

"What is your name, miss?"

"Sariah."

"Where are you headed to, Sariah?"

"I don't know."

Gil was taken aback for a moment, but pressed on. "In that case, is it possible you're free to help me out with something?"

"It is not possible."

"Why not?"

"I am not *'free.'"*

Gil's expression grew solemn. "Oh... are you someone's *slave?"*

"No. I mean to say that I am not *available,* as per the context of your original usage of the word *'free,'* as I understood it."

"So you're on a quest, but you don't know your destination?" Gil was putting the pieces of this fragmented conversation together.

"Yes."

"What is your quest?"

"I am to locate a powerful psychic brought to this world by the Dimensional Goddess, and assist him in his quest to grow his powers and eventually save the universe, while also learning from him and reporting back to the Psychic Monastery."

Gil's ears had perked up at the description of a powerful psychic. "This person you're looking for--is he even stronger than *you?"*

"I cannot speak to the ultimate potential of his ,or my own power; but at present I believe him to be vastly stronger than myself."

"Strong enough to destroy a small army?"

Sariah thought nothing of the odd specificity of this question. "Possibly. The level of dimensional disturbance which I sensed 4530 minutes ago would suggest a caliber of power far beyond anything on record at the psychic monastery."

"In that case, would you mind if I followed you until you found that person?"

"I would not mind." Sariah didn't hesitate at all. It didn't seem like this girl could impede her in any way, and communication between them was smoother than she was used to.

Gil smiled wide, thrust a fist in the air, and shouted, *"YAPPA!"*

"What is *yappa?"* Sariah asked, surprised to hear a word she didn't know any meanings of.

"It's what my people say when we're happy! And *you* should be happy to, because I think I know the *'dimensional disturbance'* you're talking about. After all, news around the country is that the Southeast town of Evermiir was *completely destroyed* the other day! I can get you there

in less than *three days* if we cut in a straight line--though by straying from the main roads, we'll probably run into even more bears and stuff!"

"I would prefer to take the most optimal route," Sariah replied, with a newfound sense of purpose gained from actually having some direction.

"Then let's *go! Go! GO!!"*

Chapter Three: 4531 Minutes Prior

In the midst of a psychedelic dreamscape of swirling orange and purple, Aether and Akida suddenly appeared, frozen in place with Aether just a few feet behind Akida's back.

"So, the upper deck gods have employed a *murderer* as their savior. How would their worshippers respond, I wonder?"

"Your claims to moral superiority are sickening in the face of your actions."

"Ahahahaha! Indeed, I suppose they are! And how *should* I be expected to behave in the face of how fate has punished me?"

"If fate has done so, then it has swung in the direction of karmic balance. Act not as though your mortal life was lived with *altruism*. For one so young to have betrayed as many friends and colleagues in their mad dash to relevance--you were almost certainly on the fast track to a long future in politics."

"The goddess is full of *wit,* I see! Yes, I really *am* a *bad man!* I used rules implied by the structure of my society to do things which *anyone* could have done, *faster* than they could do it to me! Obviously that makes me a *much* worse person than the guy who *threw himself in front of a truck with no concern for anyone and got me killed!"*

"A man broken by his realization of society's fractured state uses his life to end that of one who upholds that society's crooked nature--some would find that heroic."

"I will not hear more of this *sophistry.* Do you wish to maintain this stalemate forever?"

"Only for as long as I can. I know you are already puzzling your way through the spacial cryptic in which I've trapped you. Of course you would prefer I take your bait and attack directly--but I cannot afford to give you opportunities to grow your power."

"So we're gonna sit here until I crack your little *firewall*, eh? And how long do you suppose it'll stay up? A couple days? Maybe a few weeks? To think that even the upper deck gods can't trap me outside of linear time--and yet expect to somehow conquer *Yog-Sothoth*. What a waste of time!"

Time is all we have to work with, Aether thought, no longer interested in continuing conversation with her captive. Instead, she opened a psychic link to Takuma.

Takuma--I can only lessen my concentration in short bursts. At the rate which Akida is solving my trap, he will be free in a month's time from your perspective--and once he has a full understanding of my cryptology, I will have no way to trap him again. If you aren't strong enough to defend yourself by the time he gets loose, he will almost certainly kill you. I am sorry that I can't be of more help... but please--grow stronger, and save my world!

Chapter Four: Moonlight Soma-ta

In a softly moonlit single-bed room at the Suncrest Inn, nearly halfway between the ruins of Evermiir and the Southern Capital, Baika was nestled tightly in the bedsheets, staring down at the back of Takuma's head as he lay rolled up in the blanket on the floor. He insisted it be this way, claiming that in his home country, sleeping on the ground was normal.

In the six days which Baika and Takuma had spent traveling together, her perspective on him had massively shifted.

The vibrantly confident, smiling and self-assured man she'd seen flirting with her friends so often had become soft-spoken, cold, and short with his words--as though he were actively trying not to connect with her.

Where before, her most prominent feelings towards him were of admiration, now they were of pity--and her attraction to him had given way to a solemn feeling of duty to simply get him where he needed to go and part ways, as seemed to be his intent.

Baika realized that she had never wanted Takuma to feel guilty about the destruction of Evermiir--and that perhaps in her fantasies, it would be her encouragement and shoulder to lean on which might renew his vigor towards the adventure. In retrospect, it seemed like she'd wanted this so she could escape her own grief. She imagined a reality in which Takuma had picked himself up and comforted her in the face of her much greater loss.

It was clear to her now that this man was far more tormented than she realized. It wasn't just about the death of Evermiir or his failure to protect Exia--it was more like the person he'd been for that month was a fabrication from the start, and now he'd reverted to his true form: a man who'd be dead by his own hands this very minute had he not felt obligated to make up for the harm which his suicide had brought.

Watching him trudge through the motions of living for days on end had only deepened her own grimness. Without conversation to keep her mind active, it was free to reflect on the horrors of mangled corpses and blood-drenched streets. She'd hardly slept a handful of hours on their trip so far--her nights instead dedicated to trying to cry as quietly as possible.

Tonight, however, she couldn't bear to lay around thinking any longer. Carefully disembarking from the bed, she quietly lifted the second-story window stationed above the nightstand and slipped outside--clinging to the windowsill with her powerful fingertips as she slid the window shut again and then dropped to the ground, landing nimbly on her toes.

The cool night air spoke of summer's coming end, and was refreshing to Baika's skin. She'd never been the type to sit or lay around for long; even if she was meant to sleep, the thought of remaining still in wait for it to come was maddening. While she'd gone about her usual stretches and calisthenic workout routine each morning, she hadn't been able to properly train since leaving, and was starting to realize how strange it felt not to hear her father's commanding voice teaching her techniques with the spear each day. While she'd begun to feel lonely back at home with all her peers growing distant as they entered adulthood, it was only now that she realized just how much more lonely she would feel without them.

Suncrest Inn was hardly larger than an average two-story house, standing just a half a block from the main road. It existed purely to service travelers--there was a small stable next to it, a well on the other side, and an animal pen in the back leading to a small barn, where livestock was raised to be fed to the customers. The inn didn't even have a dining room--meals

would be brought to the room by order. It wasn't much different from the other places they'd stopped to sleep between all-day hikes, but it was particularly remote, standing as it was in the middle of an open field, eventually giving way to forests in the distance.

Baika began to aimlessly circle the building, drawing long breaths of the fresh open air and listening to the chirps of crickets in the distance. It was a beautiful night--the full moon and vast expanse of stars keeping it lit enough to see clearly. A sense of longing emerged in Baika's chest as she gazed upon the familiar heavens, wondering if anyone back home had found a moment to do so yet.

Just as she began to round the corner of the building, something entered her vision which stunned her in place.

There was a naked woman by the well.

Not only that, but she was heart-stoppingly beautiful.

Before Baika could even register that impression, her face had gone flushed pink. All at once her instincts told her to jerk her head away; but also to drink this image in, as it arrested her in the way of some famous painting. The way the woman's long black hair seemed to cradle her slender, perfectly-proportioned body, and her pale skin nearly seemed to glow in the moonlight, glistening from water droplets dotted all over, captivated Baika in a way she didn't know a woman's body could do.

And then the woman noticed her.

Their eyes met, and though Baika nearly jumped, she was at a loss for what to say. Her presence didn't seem to threaten the woman at all--and yet, she also wasn't speaking, but just staring back blankly, as if there was nothing so much as noteworthy about the situation. Baika's mind began to race with ideas of what she ought to say, but then she also couldn't help noticing the woman's nipples going erect in the chilly air, and was too embarrassed about having paid attention to that to open her mouth.

At last, the voice of a small girl broke the silence from the other side of the building.

"Sariaaah! Why do you always wander off in the middle of the night?? You know it spooks me when I wake up and see you go--*oh,* you're naked again." As the short, goat-horned girl dressed in a white nightgown emerged into Baika's view, she fought the urge to run and hide. Before she could succumb to it, the girl noticed her.

"Oh, hello there. Were you two having a conversation?"

"No." The naked woman responded, finally opening her mouth. Hearing it, Baika snapped into focus and realized she was still living in this moment.

"Oh! Ah... I'm very sorry! I didn't mean to... um... I was just going for a walk..."

"Hey, don't worry about it!" The cheery young girl beamed. *"You're* not the weirdo who decides to get *naked* in the middle of a field and bathe in well water at *3AM.*"

"I like to bathe at night," the older woman stated matter-of-factly, not so much defending herself as simply seeming to feel the need to clarify.

"Yeah, yeah--are you just gonna stand there naked all night, or what?"

"I am not."

Baika was feeling more out of place by the moment and unsure of how to continue this interaction, so she sought to see her way out of it.

"A... anyways, I'm sorry again for interrupting your, uh... bath..." Baika started to slink away behind the building, but was interrupted by the nude woman's voice.

"Excuse me--may I ask your name?"

This time, both Baika and the smaller girl were surprised for different reasons.

"My name is Baika."

"Baika. My name is Sariah. It is good to meet you."

"Um... it's good to meet you too, Sariah. I'm going to head back to my room now... perhaps I will see you again in the morning." With that, Baika made a quick retreat, slinking back behind the building.

When she'd been gone for a moment, she faintly overheard the younger girl asking into the air, "aren't all the rooms beside ours and the owners on the *second floor*, though?" Hearing this, Baika suddenly realized that she'd never actually thought about how she was going to get back into the room without having to loudly kick off of the house, and started to feel a compound sense of embarrassment.

"You are right," Sariah responded to the small girl, and then suddenly shouted.

"BAIKA!"

"Shh--! Not so loud, people are sleeping!" Gil instructed, *"and put your clothes on first!"* In a blink, the clothes at Sariah's feet disappeared, and simultaneously what would've appeared to anyone else to be the exact same clothes appeared on her body. Dressed, she hastily made her way in the direction Baika had taken off--and hearing her approach, Baika nearly fell to her knees with embarrassment, knowing there was nowhere she could run to escape this situation.

"Would you like me to help you reach your room?" Sariah asked, as she caught up with the well-endowed blonde.

"Eh? I mean, *how?"* Baika asked, surprised at the suggestion.

"I will use my psychic abilities to open the window for you, and my hands to hoist you up. Is that your window there?" Sariah indicated the window above them.

Baika nodded, but quickly added, *"but do it quietly--! ...if you can, please."*

"I can." Sariah looked up at the window and, by gradually displacing air in the space between the window and its resting place, pushed it open. Then she netted her hands together and offered them to Baika as a support. Swept up in the weirdness of the situation, Baika obliged and placed her foot in the psychic girl's perch. She was surprised by the sturdiness of the beautiful girl's grip, and with both of them moving in perfect synch, Baika was launched up in a clean jump and caught hold of the windowsill, her massive breasts cushioning the sound of her body hitting the side of the house.

"Thank you!" Baika called down in a hushed whisper, trying her best to glance back and down at the strange woman.

"I'll see you in the morning," Sariah responded, and then watched as Baika pulled herself quietly into the room and shut the window. They shared a wave to one-another before turning to go their own ways.

As Baika curled back under the sheets on the bed, her heart was racing from the combination of physical activity, emotional embarrassment, and outright confusion. At the forefront of her thoughts was just a single pressing question:

Oh my god, am I gay?

Chapter Five: Newtype Flash

"Sariah, wake up! *Wake uuuup!"*

"Rrrrmmm"

Sleep had never come easy to Sariah, and she wasn't used to needing more than five hours of it a night--but she'd been especially troubled finding it the night before.

Simply put, Sariah had not been ready to fall in love again.

Relationships of any kind had always proven difficult to maintain for Sariah, given that they consisted almost definitionally of communication; but she had nonetheless found herself in a somewhat serious one for a few months just a year and a half prior. The other girl had been petite, large-breasted, and about a year younger than her, with much weaker psychic powers. They'd been training together at the monastery; she'd caught Sariah's wandering gaze landing on her breasts and taken an interest in the older girl.

While Sariah had loved spending time with the girl, she could feel herself being led through the relationship and somehow treated with kids' gloves; and yet, when the girl broke it off, she had claimed that she was holding Sariah back. While it was true that Sariah's powers were much greater, the claim had never settled right with her. She'd thought back on it many times, trying to rationalize exactly what the girl had meant by it, or figure out if she'd really meant something else that Sariah couldn't pick up on.

There was something distinctly different about the impression she got from Baika; something in her polite and respectful demeanor which read differently from the last large-breasted girl whom Sariah had been enamored with. Whereas that girl had come right out and approached her about a relationship, this time it seemed like Sariah would be the one who needed to say something before it was too late. After all, they were both travelers--for all she knew, their paths were about to diverge forever.

And so she'd been up all night racking her brain about what to say in the morning, and only gotten two hours of sleep.

"Come on!! That girl you wanted to see is already outside doing her morning exercise!"

Sariah jolted up and threw the covers aside. When something had her attention, it really had it.

Gil had already gotten all of their things and herself ready, so Sariah just threw on her clogs, took her now-overstuffed backpack onto her shoulder, and headed right out of the room and the building without hesitation. Gil thanked the owner on her way out.

Outside of the building, Baika was stretching her legs, facing into the distance alongside another figure--a black-haired, lazily-dressed man in glasses smoking rolled tobacco from the side of his mouth. The man turned to check the source of the footsteps he could hear emerging from behind, and his eyes happened to meet Sariah’s--and as soon as they did, both of them

felt an intense shake running through their bodies. It was a feeling Sariah instantly knew as the recognition of a fellow psychic; except that this man's psychic footprint was vastly greater than any she'd ever felt before. It was possible that she herself could not have caused anyone to feel the level of chill which she had just gotten from meeting his gaze.

Takuma was feeling something similar--he'd been told by Chrom that his powers were psychic in nature, which is why Chrom couldn't teach him any more advanced magic; but he'd never come into contact with any powerful psychics, since most of those could be found either in the Psychic Monastery, or in the Balamor military employ. Still, he'd felt odd tinges like this on much smaller levels when making eye contact with certain villagers in Evermiir--even more than once for one person--and he was feeling it far more intensely from this girl than he ever had from anyone else.

Noticing Takuma's attention changing direction, Baika turned her gaze and, on realizing who was at the door, went flush before she could think of how to greet her--and then noticed that she and Takuma seemed locked into some kind of strangely intense moment. Baika had picked up on the fact that Sariah was at least a more powerful psychic than any she'd encountered in the village before Takuma showed up, but she didn't know how that power might compare to Takuma's, or whether there were consequences to the realization of mutual strength between psychics.

A much greater depth of realization was occurring in Sariah's mind. Somehow, this depth of wavelength connection had allowed her to realize something she'd never been able to notice before. She'd never seen it for herself, but she felt like Takuma's expression must have looked the same as one she'd made made many times. It wasn't easily recognizable--in fact, it was deliberately veiled--and yet, if you knew it was there, it was unmistakable. It was something she could usually only see when she studied her own reflection to understand how her face might be used to reflect her feelings.

The catharsis of realization didn't reach her as quickly as the strange sense of empathy she felt toward the sentiment. In this moment in which things were exciting and emotional for her, this man's reality was a crushing weight on his shoulders that he wanted to be rid of. It was the same way she'd felt before she developed an approachable body--when she was simply deemed a *frightening child* by the people her own age. It was that empty feeling that the only reason to participate in a game as broken as life was out of a sense of obligation that maybe you'll can fixture out how to have done more good in the end than bad.

Reading Takuma's face was like reading a book about her own past.

It had all come in a flash--countless datapoints connected in one moment, interpreted as quickly as collected. All Sariah had to ask herself was*, 'what would I have wanted in this moment?'* Of course, she would've wanted the very thing she'd found--a substance which effected her mood and behavior such as that she could behave more truly to her emotions; concerning herself less with communicating correctly and being understood, and more with enjoying herself and letting the words come out.

"You look like you could use some *kesh,"* Sariah finally said, after a few seconds of silence which had felt especially long for everyone standing there. Time elongated further as Gil, too, emerged outside and tried to understand what the hell was going on.

Sariah didn't bother waiting for Takuma to respond--she materialized in her hand what looked like a rolled cigar with some kind of ground-up blue herb in the middle.

"This is for psychics like us. Smoking it makes it feel like time is *slowing down* to give you more room to think. It's very relaxing, and by the time it's over, hours will have passed, and it will have felt like you were back at the start just a few minutes ago; even if you're keeping track of time the whole way." (Sariah always was.)

"e... eh??" Baika was stunned by this situation. She couldn't figure out what was advisable to any of the parties involved--whether the beautiful girl she'd been thinking about the night before was even trustworthy, or how this situation had emerged so suddenly. She certainly wasn't expecting Takuma's response.

"Sure, I'll try it."

"Eh??!" Baika had no idea what kind of connection these two must have been experiencing to jump to such a radical first interaction, but it left her at a loss for words.

"I will be having some as well," Sariah continued.

Gil was having trouble following what was going on, but it seemed like Sariah was trying to assure them of the drug's safety by trying it herself--an unexpectedly wise move. In reality, Sariah just wanted to loosen herself up so that she could talk to Baika more openly while Takuma was high on her psychic drugs.

"Gil, please light this for me," Sariah asked. Gil extended the amber stone on her staff up to the tip of the cigar between Sariah's lips and, after a long inhale, the end of the cigar was well lit. A cloud of smoke was puffed out of it, followed seconds later by enormous tufts of white smoke billowing from Sariah's mouth and nose as she exhaled. She then extended a hand to offer it to Takuma, as done in the Monastery's smoking rituals.

"This drug is very expensive in the place you are headed to. I will let you have this if you allow us to travel alongside you until our paths diverge," Sariah explained.

"No problem," Takuma responded, and took the cigar from the younger-looking girl. Having lived as a milquetoast Japanese nerd his entire life, Takuma had never had any direct encounters with drugs; but he'd read a lot of foreign literature which described the effects of them, enjoyed lots of music inspired by them, and had always been curious about them. Back in the village, the older generation would pass around a pipe containing some sort of grass--but the one time he'd partaken, it'd sent him spiralling into darker thoughts, and he'd decided to avoid it for the time being. But if this was supposed to be different and more helpful to his current state of mind, then he'd be excited to give it a try. It wasn't an escape he ever might've sought for himself, but to have it suddenly come on offer seemed foolish to refuse.

After handing the cigar off to Takuma and letting him start to inhale, Sariah turned to Baika and greeted her. "I am glad I got to see you again this morning," she said.

"Oh, um... I am glad too," Baika blushed again in response. Ever-perceptive, Gil suddenly picked up on the strange sense of romantic tension in the air. Somehow, Sariah's statement had read clearly down the center line of formality and flirtatiousness. Could it be that her obsessive need to find an exact phrasing for the feeling she wants to convey to someone actually gave her game??

If so, Gil was immediately determined to get proactive in being her wingman. She wasn't sure yet if Sariah had decided that this was the guy they were looking for, but if she was willing

to take such a massive diversion, even just purely in the name of pursuing this girl, then Gil thought it would be worth it to help her out--so she took initiative in leading the group to start hitting the road.

Chapter Six: Dead Man Walking

I never wanted to write stupid ironic light novels.

Of course not. I mean, sure, I respect the greats--I read NISIOISIN and Romeo Tanaka, and I knew you could do interesting things with them; but I could also feel the undercurrent even in their stories that these authors couldn't consider themselves true artistic geniuses on the caliber of the people they admire. They speak with reverence of authors remembered throughout the 20th century such as Dezai and Salinger. Of course they *wanted* to be someone like that--but Nisioisin's characters were always people who'd come up *short* of genius, *examining* the habits and insanity of geniuses.

I, too, wanted to be more than that. I wanted to be better than Murakami--I wanted to be better than *anyone* just remembered for writing great books. I wanted to be someone who *pushed things forward* and *defined genres*--someone *remembered* and *referenced* in the manner of H.P. Lovecraft or J.R.R. Tolkien. I wanted to create epic worlds with deep, verisimilitudinous mythology--in which realistic characters had to make important, human decisions. To develop political and cultural landscapes so memorable as to have reference made to them constantly, in stories which use them as shorthand starting points to explore more specific, basic fetishes implied by that world's boundaries, and the flexibility granted to it by mass understanding.

But the truth is, no matter how meta-textual I could get with my story--how uniquely I could frame the themes I wanted to explore--I could find no evidence that any of my ideas hadn't been done already by much better authors, who'd shown even greater genius from an even younger age than myself--or who'd really dedicated themselves to success in mainstream fields in their early 20s--whereas I was lucky to even have been picked up off the internet, and probably only because I moved into a shitty Tokyo apartment that was close to publishers.

I had been toiling away at trying to metastisize the perfect story idea for so long, that I'd never completed even half a volume of anything. My writing would improve, but any time I read a piece of modern literature with more learned writing than mine, it would crush my soul and make me feel like I'd poisoned my mind by watching so much late night anime, and allowing myself to accept fetishistic nonsense as a primary hobby above regular consumption of more literary work.

By the time I was 23, I'd been out of school and at home with nothing to show for it; living as a NEET in my parents' house with a four-year degree, no job, and no idea what I wanted to do with it at all. At the time, Shoushitsu ni Naroo was a growing platform on which hilariously-titled and oddly-specific isekai stories would frequently be selected for publication by mainstream distributors--and even sometimes get released worldwide or achieve anime adaptations.

I thought I was *above* the entire genre. Some of the *titles* were funny, and some of the stories were *occasionally* told competently, but the literary content beyond meta-humor was always incredibly lacking. The only way I was going to participate in this was if I could create the *most* outrageously stupid and specific idea that anyone had come up with yet, and see if it was enough to get me a book deal. In the same wave as the book about the guy turning into a vending machine and the one about the guy getting turned into a hot spring, I made my debut with *Reincarnated In Another World As A Moderately-Sized Convection Oven.* It only lasted for three books because I immediately ran out of ideas for how the situation could be made funny; and since my artist had taken the ironic nature of the story as carte-blanche to go all-in on incorporating his own fetish into the presentation, he drew all of the girls with enormously massive tits, giving it a much more niche appeal, which didn't have enough correlation to the central humor to find a strong buyer base.

After that point, I realized that if I wanted to continue down this road of writing stupid light novels as a day job, I needed to approach the stories with a bit more sincerity and try to create characters with more emotional attachment to the protagonist. A wife character and a little sister were both far more endearing waifus than the characters from the past book, who'd all been deliberately over-the-top cliches as parody.

The little sister book was terrible--the meta-ironic humor got old quickly, so I just started filling the stories with as many absurd and over-the-top erotic sequences as possible, knowing that the people who just like little sisters a lot would find a way to get off on it (even though the character is unlikably ridiculous). This story, despite being too weird and stupid for anime studios to have any idea how to treat it, was my more popular one--although it has been on the decline recently for just getting too weird, as my well of simple ideas has ran out.

The Wife Isekai book was less popular, but had a much more sincere following, including people who might go so far as to write me fanmail about how they connected with the story. It came as a surprise to me, since the idea was mostly just meant to be as stupid as any other isekai concep--but I found myself enjoying the odd romantic dynimic of this husband-and-wife couple, who both struggle to communicate and so run away into fantasy stories; but since they've run away into the same one, it leads to dumb misunderstandings and heartwarming scenes when the characters actually work through conflicts and remember why they're married. After all, it's not like they hate each-other.

This story was still incredibly stupid--I had to desperately claw for reasons for each volume to end on a huge action scene, and most of the other waifu characters were pretty narratively impotent, with the OTP being so obvious. The more serious fans of the story have to excuse it for the fact that the main guy slips into other girls' breasts for no reason (besides giving fanservice to the side cast in a mad grab for sales and excuses for illustrations).

Earlier on in my career, I had taken up writing isekai parodies as a full-time job with the understanding that I would use my *spare time* to continue trying to construct my own more serious novel in the background. When I realized that my ability to write a lot of books very quickly was the only thing keeping my flimsy stories in the public consciousness, and felt justified in that I could at least explore some of my more personal themes in my stories, I let myself get completely lost in relentlessly putting out books left and right. The manga versions of each of my main stories had already been canceled, but I was involved in the creation of a

still-running manga series for the last three years which has at this point almost been completely taken over by the artist and has little for me to contribute anymore.

At some point I had to ask myself: why had I written two books in the span of a month, pace-matching some of the best prolific light novelists, while creating books which I couldn't even say were as good as those--when I wanted to be much, much better, and was already much older than some of these authors had been when they broke.

The only answer I could come up with is that I just wasn't good enough. I had run away into writing these stories because I'd admitted to myself that this was the best I could do. It was in that moment of resignation when I decided my life wasn't worth living anymore... all I'd needed was a push of the delete key.

As I think about how much more interesting all of this would've been to write about than what I'd actually been making, I realize I'm not sure how long ago I finished that cigar. With the amount of time I've been lost in my own head, it could've easily been thirty minutes... or an hour? How was time supposed to feel like it'd passed when this was over?

After they'd introduced themselves, the psychic girl had been directing more of her conversation towards Baika. I'd initially only confirmed or expanded on information given while losing track of the conversation, gradually disappearing into my own thoughts. By the time I notice how far we've walked and how I've basically summarized my entire life inside my head, I realize I'm walking a couple of meters behind the group of girls, who are now miles-deep into a conversation I knew nothing about at all.

Figuring that this doesn't seem like a negative social situation and that I should just continue to use the opportunity to explore my feelings, I consider my time in Evermiir:

The saddest part of being there was how I'd realized what I should've done when I was alive to try and get my life on-track. The town had reminded me of my birthplace in Aomori prefecture--living in various almost-rural small towns where most people knew each-other. When I was seven my parents had moved us to Kyoto for my dad's job opportunity, which he thought would get him paid enough to put me through college. My grades were shaky in high school, though, and I was more interested in creativity than studies at the time. Nevertheless, I was smart enough, and my dad had enough money. to put me through college without having to take out many loans--and I had no desire to rush out into the job market at 18, so I took the offer, got a four-year degree in writing from a mediocre college, and did nothing with it.

After I finally got a job and moved out of the house into the heart of Tokyo, my parents decided to return to Aomori and live a less-expensive lifestyle, while my dad got a lower-stress job working with his family back in his hometown. Since I'd already gotten published, I thought as soon as I got to Tokyo everything would start moving really fast for me; but in the months it took me to organize and execute the move, I lost momentum writing volume 3 of Convection Oven--and by the time it came out, its release was completely overshadowed by that of a new light novel series with the same artist as Infinite Stratos.

I was stuck in Tokyo for the first year, but launching into ImoRetard and Wife Isekai and even getting to do an 18+ series and a manga on the side was totally exciting; it felt like I was

really making it as an author, whatever that was worth. When the manga adaptations both got canceled, I should've shifted my focus and reconsidered the future of my career.

Instead of burning my wick at both ends trying to write all these ailing light novel series as fast as possible just to afford living in Tokyo, I should've followed my parents back out to Aomori, needed far less money, cut down my production rate and tried to come up with some new, more interesting ideas, now that I was well-practiced at writing long series. Any of my ongoing series could've easily been concluded, and I could've counted on my fans to be excited for me to try and do something even better. Hell, even if I couldn't have gotten it published, if I was proud of what I was writing I could've launched some kind of crowdfunding campaign for it. Even if it only made a couple thousand yen a month and I still had to write multiple books to make a living, it would've been enough encouragement for me to keep pursuing my passion for writing something good.

The truth is that I was haunted by the thought that I just wasn't good enough to pull it off. If I lost my connections in Tokyo and wasn't readily available in person, I didn't know if the publishing industry would maintain interest in me; and if I wasn't getting published, I needed to have a very dedicated fanbase willing to buy my self-published releases to keep it as a career--an audience big enough to justify traveling to Comiket to have a booth every six months--and I didn't know if people really cared that much.

In retrospect, taking that risk would've gone much better for everyone involved than what I chose instead. It wasn't enough that I gave up without really trying like a coward, but I also killed someone else and lead *them* to the power and motivation to *murder an entire town full of people*--many of whom I'd come to appreciate, and who were connected deeply to the ones I'd fallen in love with. No one would've had to suffer if not for my decisions.

I don't know if I can achieve any kind of redemption by saving the universe--in fact, my continuing on this journey isn't even so much out of feeling that I need to make good on my mistakes, but out of my literal lack of choice in the matter. I have no purpose existing in this world except for to save it--and were I to shut down and remain inactive, I would definitively damn this world to be consumed by a power against which it is not fit to compete. There would be *no doubt* that I would be killing everyone in the universe--and there is no way I could allow myself to become that kind of villain--not the kind that I'd turned Akida into by killing him.

Regardless of my intentions of completing this journey, as I've done so many other RPGs that end in murdering creatures named after Lovecraft monsters, I ha e no way of knowing if such a thing is even possible in the reality of this world.

Initially, it appeared as though I'd been brought into a generic isekai story like any other--one in which I would be unstoppably powerful, and naturally progress towards the ending by virtue of competent storytelling. (Or otherwise circle the drain eternally in mundanity.) However, because I was given to my own agency, I immediately began living my life differently from typical isekai protagonists, due to the lack of limitations of what I could have my main character--him being myself--do.

It was clear by this point that this wasn't the kind of light-hearted parody book that I'd become known for publishing. It was much closer to the kind of dark and subversive story which I'd always *really* wanted to tell.

It was possible that this world might be modeled in the style of one of those edgier otaku stories, like *Re:Zero* or *Steins;Gate*, in which the hero must suffer again and again under the weight of their failures before they can reach a happy ending. Even those stories are built from the ground up to lead to the main character winning and getting their happy ending, no matter how much they had to suffer; but those weren't the kinds of stories I wanted to write. I wanted to be like my real favorite, H.P. Lovecraft, and write cosmic horror. If this world had *really* been based on the kind of novel that I'd wanted to write, it's possible that it was built from the ground up for me to *lose.*

If that was the case, I wasn't going to find out until I'd already gone as far as I could; and I had no idea how long that was going to be, considering I had no idea how I could make progress in the next month if at all possible.

Magi-knight Chrom had introduced me to the basic concepts of how magic worked in this world, while telling me a lot about the general structure of the government and society here and who I'd be able to work with to enhance my power. He'd been in communication with the capital on the subject of my arrival for a while, and I'd been just about to head there anyways in order to learn more about expanding my abilities when Akida had shown up and added the pressure to power up as quickly as possible--while also crushing my sense of security and all the human connections I'd made since coming to this world.

Now, my only hope is that the powerful magicians in the capital can teach me how to achieve the same power class as Akida in less than 21 days. It is a faint hope.

Chapter Seven: Magic of the Beastmen

At least three hours pass by the time I think to speak again.

When I come out of my thoughts and into reality, I realize I've crouched around a fire, which is being stoked by the little goat-horned girl's magic to boil a pot of water. We've stopped to make lunch. Sariah and Baika however aren't hovering around the pot--they've gone off to sit under a tree and continue their conversation just out of earshot. I'm not sure what's going on with them at this point, but it seems like they're enjoying one-another's company, so I turn my attention to the girl I've now been left alone with for a while and not spoken to at all, who's apparently making us lunch.

"Are you a fire magic specialist?" I ask. While I don't know a ton about magic, I do know that the common forms of magic in this world are based in the elements. Different magicians are likely to specialize in mastery of high-level spells of certain elements, since understanding how to use each one is like mastering a different programming language. Each of them has their own logic under which they operate, and you'll need to be able to write your own code in that elemental language in order to use spells.

"I'm an *all-rounder!"* Gil responds cheerily. "I *do* carry a lot of *basic fire scrolls* on me tho, 'cause it comes in handy. A lot of *other* basic stuff occurs naturally--no need to have a bunch of 'make water' scrolls on me when there's wells everywhere."

"How many different elements can you use?"

"All of them! At least on some level. There's plenty of spells which are simple enough that you can understand them just by looking at them, even if you haven't mastered the

language they're written in. I've tried to maintain a good balance of memorizing spells in *all* the different elemental categories as I slowly build up my knowledge!"

"Just how many categories are there? Sorry if this is considered common knowledge, but you may have heard that I was brought to this world under strange circumstances."

"Of course--no worries! So--there are *fifteen* different elemental types which correspond to each of what we call the Lower Deck Gods--Gods which manage the existence of these elements on planet Einjol. These include the elements of fire, water, wind, earth, spirit, animals, plants, death, metal, infrared, magnetism, gravity, ultraviolet, signal, and blood--represented respectively by the gods Darien, Alcest, Orgmaggon, Gologoth, Suisoui, Shenjen, Arisa, Nibliblim, Girugamesh, Ninelife, Brinbrin, Amagam, Dingle, Prinmf, and Jesus."

That last one is strangely familiar.

"The existence of each of these gods keeps the elements working in the way they're *supposed to,* harmoniously--however, the gods will allow their rules to be *bent* for the sake of helping humans in their ambitions, so long as those humans can *prove their understanding* of the inner workings of those elements by mastering their languages. Theoretically, if someone lived forever, or kept their knowledge perpetuated and expanded on through enough generations, a human could one day emerge with knowledge enough to *take over* the position of a God! But it isn't known if humans have the capacity to ever collect the level of knowledge those gods have--and so we give deference to them as we invoke their powers for our benefit."

Well--that was a much more detailed explanation than expected, and this girl is surprisingly well-spoken--so I ask further to continue the conversation.

"What made you decide to become an all-rounder instead of a specialist? I assume that it's harder to reach a significant power level within your lifetime as an all-rounder--no offense."

"None taken. The all-rounder approach is the way of the Beastmen tribes. *We* believe that achieving good balance in elemental understanding is the *best* way to live in harmony and convenience with the forces of nature. To focus on the overwhelming power of *one* elemental mastery *always* leads to an attempt to dominate through them."

I can't tell if this girl thinks so philosophically about these powers out of her own observations, or if this is the conventional mode of thought among beastmen--which reminds me that while I'd not even blinked an eye at the existence of a beastman race within his world, I'd nonetheless failed to encounter any sight or mention of them so far, and am now at the very least extremely curious now to know more about them. I did, after all, create the ‘world design’ for *Eighteen Races of Beast Girl Are Lusting For My Human Body,* even if it was truly the artist who brought the story to life with his designs.

"I've never encountered a beastman before--if you don't mind my asking, where do you come from? Are beastmen common in this country?" I ask.

"Well, we have some time while I cook this--would you like me to explain the history of how my people came to be? Our history goes back three hundred years or so."

I don't know how much depth she's planning to go into, but I have nothing better to talk about and it's not like I'm uncurious, so I say, "sure, why not."

"It all started around three-hundred years ago in Balamor’s capital city of the time, called Casenick. It is now called the Southern Capital, where the King himself does not reside--but

which manages affairs in the Southern half of the region with the Archduke Remigald wielding the power of all but a King--subject only to the capital's mandates. At the time, the palace was the absolute forefront of magical research in the country, and all of it was being developed with the hopes of growing the empire as naturally as possible; advancing through improvements to human efficiency and capability so that other nations would submit just to get access to their schools. The kingdom could conquer anything it wanted in a heartbeat, and laid waste to anyone trying to invade.

While the arch-wizards with mastery in the likes of city-class fire magic provided the military might to topple armies with lesser magical benefactors, it was those at the forefront of spirit and animal magic who would provide the free workforce that was going to make Balamor such a good place to live for those being newly assimilated into the country: the creation of *slave golems* made by bonding spirit remnants of the recently deceased with *chimeras* made from human and animal corpses.

The initial run of Beastmen Golems was crafted to be strong and stupid--barely capable of understanding enough basic instruction and guidance to perform repetitive tasks every day, but with no personal desires or free will to live their lives beyond slavery. The far-reaching implications of what could be accomplished by creating humanlike slaves was immediately apparent. If they could be inexpensively mass-produced while under incredibly high demand, the government in charge of the research was going to become unimaginably wealthy by selling these to anyone that wanted them.

Of course, plenty of people with money to burn and twisted ways of celebrating their power wanted *beast girl sex slaves*--and pretty soon, the market for high-end, *specifically-crafted* beastwoman slaves was making up a third of the project's profit, after the huge margins they were raking in creating basic work slaves and soldiers. The wizards could tune a slave's intelligence and ability to communicate to exacting specifications, so that rich enough nobles could craft the perfect slaves of their choosing.

Even in this early stage, there were many who decried the unethical treatment of these living beings, which had been imbued with remnants of human souls; particularly in the case of the *rape slaves*, who were arguably being treated to even worse abuse than animals raised for human consumption. These voices were painted as *unpatriotic* in light of the great wealth and power which the nation and its people had achieved through the sale of these slaves by the government.

Unfortunately for those in power, their own oversight in the treatment of beastmen sewed the seeds of the downfall in their system. Because beastmen were built partially out of human genetics and bound with human spirits, they were able to be impregnated by humans as well--and it wasn't long before a generation of humans born of beastmen with animal traits was born. The rights of these children were brought into the public discourse as the number of births increased; but under the law, they had no more rights than their slave mothers, and were treated by most human parents no differently.

There were other human parents who grew attached to their slaves and their offspring, and sought to raise them intelligently--and once it was proven that these new children could be properly educated like humans, the conversation changed once again--in no small part because some of these children grew up well-studied and were able to *weigh in* on that conversation.

These children weren't only fighting for their own rights--they also wanted to protect their mothers, who were technically still slaves by law to their fathers--and all of the other beastmen and women who were being treated as less-than-human by their owners, in spite of their capacity to give birth to functional human beings.

When the government of Balamor tried to *ignore* their movement and brush it under the rug, the first-generation half-beasts of intelligence formulated a plan to incite an uprising. They started by locating and converting other half-breeds like themselves who were capable of understanding, and informed them of their situation and the means by which the beastmen could overthrow the government. As long as there were enough first-generation half-beasts who could guide their parents and the other slaves into rebellion, they could overwhelm individual slave-owners by staying rallied together in one movement; and if the military came after them, it would only cement the status of their martyrdom to continued generations of beast-children.

The rebellion was shockingly successful--the slaves were even easier for the half-beasts to manipulate than they were for the humans, since their deeper kinship with the bestial sides of them gave them other, more complex forms of communication which humans couldn't use to reach them. The country had become so reliant on slavery that slaves were virtually everywhere--and by the time the military would have to get involved if they wanted to stop the revolt, it would've ultimately meant the wholesale genocide of hundreds of thousands of slaves, who were asking for nothing more than equal rights and the ability to form their own community as reparation for their treatment to that point.

Ultimately, the government decided that either keeping or mass-annihilating the beastmen would ultimately do more harm to them than good at a time when their empire was doing very well. It was possible they could fill the financial hole left by losing the sale and financial efficiency of slave labo-- but if they were destabilized by uprising, then it was likely another country would swoop in and invade while they were weak, possibly damaging the empire straight into its grave. They figured that freeing the Beastmen was the lesser risk==and in a surprising move of peacekeeping, they offered the entirety of the Northern Wildlands to the Beastmen as a permanent self-governing home within the nation's boundaries.

The Northern Wildlands were completely unlivable and had no strategic advantages for the humans, so it wasn't like they were going to miss it--it was just unused land which happened to be within the area of Balamor’s reign--but the beastial properties of the Beastmen were uniquely suited to the area's climate and geography of mostly jungle, so they were happy to inherit a kingdom in which they could live based on their own values.

The natural kinship which the beastmen felt toward each of the sixteen categories of magic which govern Einjol lead them to develop a theory of lifestyle which involves understanding all of the abilities available to you as a creature on this planet, and to live a life sustained by your relationship to magic over money or status. As such, the beastmen tribes concerned themselves not with concentrating power, but with creating many small, self-sustaining communities of varying size throughout the Northern Wildlands.

Depending on how you looked at this whole situation--(and this is the way that Boromir chooses to look at it)--all's well that ends well. Over the past two-hundred years, breeding amidst the Beastmen and continued contact with humanity has lead to the extinction of slave Beastmen with heavily cultivated mental capabilities; now, beastmen are generally considered

to be of equal intelligence to humans, and there is open trade between human and beastmen cities, as well as near-total integration of beast spawn into every strata of society wherever they happen to crop up. Still, though, the tribes in the North remain largely autonomous, and there aren't many humans who've gone out to visit those places beyond friendly magical scientists and gurus, since it's still not very livable for humans.

To tell you the truth, though, the relationship between Balamor's government and the Beastmen tribes isn't as tight as one would hope. While the Beastmen are allowed their independence, if they were to be put in a situation where they needed the government's aid, the government is going to blow them off completely. This has been obvious for a long time, but it's only started to really an effect on the state of the tribes more recently. Say, *Mr. Takuma*--forgive me for going on and on, but I promise this stew will be *truly delicious* when it's complete in some forty minutes. Would you please listen to my story?"

I've already been listening to her exposition dump for quite some time, completely drawn in by the learned eloquence of her explanations, so I encourage her to continue with whatever else she can teach me.

Chapter Eight: Invasion of the Jimbali

My father is the leader of the smallest major Beastman tribe--the Jimbalis, residing in the Northernmost part of the Wildlands least-livable to humans. Our home is atop a land of dense spiritual magic, making it a thriving center for the core practitioners of our magical ethos. These make up a small part of the population, because the most *advanced technique* of Beastman magic is to combine *psychic abilities* with a baseline knowledge of *all fifteen* elemental magics.

Our top magicians cracked open a course through magic which could lead to new horizons of ability--but the techniques are almost impossible to comprehend to those without high spiritual attunement--which Beastmen have as a matter of their construction. Those who know of the new techniques mostly reside within the village; and while we had sent envoys to the capital and to the Monastery to negotiate terms of spreading understanding, provided they could send powerful Beastman mages from the capital and the Psychic Monastery to come study in the village, the capital didn't even bother following up on the invitation--seeming to have no interest in the madness of some *backwater Beastman tribe* over their *own* advancement of *unbalanced* military magic. The psychic monastery sent an envoy who's been living there and learning the technique ever since--insofar as that's possible in the village's current state.

I am only ten years old by the common calendar; but as a Beastwoman, my mental development outpaces my physical development. I also happened to grow up during the most-modern era of magic theory in history, in a place where the *entire culture* had come to revolve around the study of this magic. I was among the first generation who would be taught *from birth* in the art of combining psychic technique with elemental magic--even though *I,* myself, am *lacking* in psychic abilities. Nonetheless, I had an understanding of all of the *up-to-date research* from watching my father work with so many people.

While Balamor had been uninterested, and even the Beastmen tribes had little involvement in the development of this magic beyond sending their noteworthy psychics to study in the village, there was *another* industrious organization which would eventually have its

interest piqued by the discoveries of the Jimbali. *That* would be our direct Eastern neighbors--the nation whose border begins just at the edge of the Northern Wildlands which, while less than a sixth of Balamor's size, has used its prominent mages and a heavily-controlled society educated constantly in psychic and magic programs to be used in their army as a means to launch their own imperialistic campaign.

The Grigarios Municipality had begun targeting and assimilating weaker nations with little trade relationship with Balamor into their umbrella and giving them *something to do*. They never would've had a reason to invade the Northern Wildlands if they were under the impression that Balamor would retaliate to an invasion within their territory--however, the capital's *lack of response* in regards to the updates in magical possibilities had convinced the Grigarios *plant* living in Jimbali that they *wouldn't even notice* if Jimbali were completely taken over by Grigarios. If they could understand the new magic systems quickly enough to use them against Balamor *before* they could do anything to stop their occupation, then there was a *chance* they could put up a fight against the mighty empire.

My father caught wind of a movement of forces to Grigarios' border city of Shelliard which neighbors our village directly. At the time, *I* was being appointed as an official foreign affairs agent, whose mission was to seek out and speak with human psychics of repute to try and convince them to come and learn of our discoveries in the village; and to hopefully disseminate the knowledge of our techniques back into the empire, so that they realize that we *are* in fact aiming to *share* with them abilities that could *significantly* increase their strength if, the *time* was taken to *understand* them properly. It was a big job for a ten year-old girl, but I'd spent *so* much time learning about the basic fundamentals of how these combinations worked and what they were meant to *unlock,* that I could *convincingly explain it* to someone if given the time of day. I didn't have any psychic powers myself to train in service of researching this magic, so I didn't need to remain in the village and track *every* single piece of progress--I could get updated when I made returns.

My first day of this job never came. Our priorities in the village shifted as we confirmed an invasive force was headed our way. We first tried to call on neighboring tribes for assistance--but with the brazen speed at which the invasion was launched, there weren't many soldiers who received word soon enough to arrive for battle; and far more who would only show up once the invasion was already days under way.

I was in the village on the first day of the attack. I'll never forget it, because an unfamiliar object had come hurtling by the vicinity of my head at a velocity which would've created a hole inside of it. I knew of many magics which could kill--but had never seen it harnessed in such a way to bring such quick and brutal death. It was a new kind of weapon which, when used in person, could out-pace all but a serious battle mage at ending a human life--even if the Arc-Mages at the head of Balamor's military could have obliterated the invading force in a matter of *seconds,* had they even been *paying enough attention* to know it was happening.

The fearsome weapons of the Grigarios military made easy work of our straw and wooden huts, the trees our houses were built onto, and our underpowered psychics and slow magicians. No one had yet cultivated the potential of our new magics to a level which could compete with the instant brutality of the weapon they called "the wind gun." After cutting through our frontline of defense and any warriors who'd managed to show up in time for the fight, the

soldiers captured the remainder of the villagers at gunpoint. They had enough forces that by the time we'd lost too many people for fighting to make sense anymore, they had a soldier for each and every one of us, and ready-built a perimeter fence around our village.

In charge of the invasion had been the most cunning general of the Grigarios military, General Eams Ron Goyd. As soon as he had the village under control, he stationed a full phalanx of soldiers around the city, equipped with wind guns and ready to take on any further resistance from the other Beastman tribes. Word was put out that any attempt to liberate the Jimbali would be taken as an act of aggression demanding retribution at the hands of the full might of the Grigarios military. Even with *all* of their forces combined, the Beastmen tribes didn't have enough power to go into *open war* with Grigarios without the help of the Balamor arm--unless they wanted to see massive losses.

It was obvious that Grigarios wanted the secrets of our advanced magical techniques; and if they were patient enough to actually get it, they would almost certainly continue their conquest of the Beastman tribes before continuing onto their eventual goal of destabilizing Balamor and becoming the dominant empire under their fascist ideology.

Once Grigarios had set up an effective defense and ready-built *cage* to put my people in, Eams Ron Goyd arrived on the scene himself--a huge, imposing blonde man, always dressed in massive, ornate armor and with a disgusting smile. As soon as he showed up, construction began on the *concentration camp*. His intention was to take the surviving clan members as slaves, use their manual labor for his own profit, and *torture* the psychics and magic users for answers on how to do their techniques; and then to run *experiments* on them after they'd stopped being useful to him.

I managed to escape *before* all of that happened, on the day of the attack. After the bullet had passed by my head on the ground floor of *my own house*, it had grazed the bicep of my father--whose big, orcish body had been knelt before me, gravely staring into my eyes.

"Escape now, and *don't turn back* until the fight is done--and in *secrecy.* There will be *no hope* unless you can find those capable of helping us. Leave through the wooded path and *don't return* for a *week. GO!!"*

My father's explanation--though I understood that it needed to be--was entirely too short for me to come to terms with. I forced closed my tear-filled eyes, clenches my fists, and rua--without a second thought, I *had* to *run* from the building--while the soldiers were still just far enough on the fringes of the village not to see me--and I had to head straight for the narrow path on the Western jungle boarder of the village. I took off like a *bullet* through the brush, *crying* all the way and never looking back, as I tried to *unscramble* my father's words back into concrete instructions in my mind; while trying *not to imagine* what was happening to him. I thought for *sure* he'd be killed that day.

I was wrong. In his arrogance, Eams ron Goyd had tried to keep as many of the villagers alive as he could to make the most of them as *slaves* and *experiments*. After a week, the flimsily-constructed concentration camp had popped up, and all of my people, including my father, spent their nights *locked in cells* between days which--from then on--would consist of *manual labor at gunpoint.*

No one had suspected the existence of a *survivor;* and while there were guards posted inside of the camp at night, they'd placed with the expectation of *sounding the alarm* in the

event of an *attacking force* from the other tribes. It wasn't so heavy a patrol that a *small magical girl* couldn't slip in and out undetected; so I used the *treetops* and descended down a sequence of vines in the jungle canopy to make it into the compound from above. I located the jail block and my father's cell, overcome with excitement that I would see him once more even though I knew I'd have less than a minute of safe conversation with him before I needed to leave for a much longer time.

When I reached my father's cell, it was clear he'd been *severely beaten* by Goyd's men--even if he didn't seem to be in much pain with his massive body. The series of emotions welling up within me at the sight of him led tears to my eyes, and I couldn't think of what to say before he began to brief me, much like he had the last time I saw him.

"You need to find someone who can stop this while it's only Goyd in this town, and before they get *confident enough* to continue this conquest. Be it the *monastery*, the *capital*, or an *independent party*--just *any* warrior powerful enough to see the danger in allowing this to persist--the *potential gain* if they can bring it to an end--and to *make haste* in bringing us to freedom for the sake of Balamor's future."

I was just about to shut my eyes once more and storm out of my father's life--fearing it our last encounter once again--when my father gave another parting statement.

"I love you, Gil."

The emotions welled out of me, and I threw myself into the bars of my dad's cel, giving him as much of a hug as I could.

"I love you too dad!" I said, choking up just loudly enough to spook myself into keeping my mind on the mission. As soon as our grip loosened, we pecked one-another's cheeks with a kiss, and then I disappeared quickly into the night--off to locate someone whom I could recruit to save my father's village.

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"On the second day of my journey South, I ran into Sariah--and from *her* I heard about *you*. I wanted to know if you were *strong enough* to save my village... but I didn't know you'd have such an *important mission* with such a short deadline."

Gil's story had a lot to chew on--and not just in understanding the lore of this world. Elements of her story gave me *deja vu*.

It's not so much that it seemed similar to one of the subplots from the Beast Girl manga--it's *almost exactly* the same as the *original* idea that I had for a prior book, before I incorporated those elements into that manga.

My instinct as an author kicks in, forging connections across my history, and recalling the unsubtle way that I dramatically *set myself up* for the thematic payoff of tying my love for cosmic horror into my experience of a supposedly-straightforward trashy light novel parody exactly like the ones I built my career writing; which is actually *more similar* to the ideas that I've never managed to express in a complete story.

"If I can learn powerful magic from the grand mages at the capital, then commanding that magic alongside my psychic abilities should make me strong enough to save the beastmen tribe; and possibly to defend myself from Akida's return. Especially so if I have the chance to

learn how to combine those powers from the village shamans. *You* may not be able to teach me high-level magic, but if you can get me acquainted with the *basics* as we journey to the capital, it might expediate my learning such that I can rescue the village *sooner."*

As I speak, Gil's eyes widen and fill with tears, catching me off-guard. She finally blurts out, *"you really want to save my village so much that you'll make a promise like that??"* Her voice is erupting with a hope she must've been trying to suppress until now.

"I really do believe that you can help me. Based on the flashes that I get when interacting with the Goddess who brought me here and with Sariah, and on the powers granted to Akida by Yog-Sothoth, it's clear that psychic, *dimensionally-based powers* are capable of much more than simple *elemental powers* tied to the Lower-Deck Gods of this world. The only reason that learning this world's high-level magic should benefit me is that, when *combined* with my psychic abilities, it should unleash something potentially *equal* or *superior to* the power which *Akida* was granted from the start. In truth, freeing the village may actually be *even more important*--but since the capital is on the way as it is, and already knows we're coming, it should be as simple as commencing with intensive training *immediately* on my arrival."

"Will it really be enough? Even if you get the power from the village, or spend weeks in the capital, can you *really* learn enough high-level magic to protect you from Akida?" At this point, Gil was already as worried about my well-being for having promised to help her as she was for the well-being of her village.

"I haven't got any *choice* but to believe. To be honest, my feelings are neutral. Until recently, I was experiencing the best time of my entire life living in this world. Now, I have no choice but to *ignore my surroundings* as best I can and barrel towards my goal as quickly as possible, if I *or* the universe is going to live. If I'm really the *only* one who can protect these people, then all I can do is give myself over to them, right? The alternative is that *everyone dies* because of *my* mistakes. I'd *love* to run away, but it doesn't seem to work that way here."

Gil's expression has grown sullen. I feel bad for saying something so depressing in front of a child, even if she's coming from a similarly hopeless place and putting up a brave face constantly. I want to give her some ease.

"Your story reminded me of a novel I wanted to write years ago. Eventually, I came up with a much *softer* take on the same story, to be incorporated into a fanservice-comedy manga which I created the setting for. Once the narrative got rolling, it really became the artist's story, and I basically had nothing to do with it anymore; but since the *original* story that I imagined never came to life, *that girl's* father was *never saved*. It's only *now* I've realized what a cruel thing I did to her by making her wait--and which I'll do to *you* now by making you wait as well."

"It's not like that! Please, don't worry about *me--you* need to be strong enough to defeat the enemy if you're to be of any help to me, anyways!"

"I've always struggled with *continuing* a story once I *planned it out* too much. I become obsessed with reaching the part that I *need* to get to, instead of letting the events flow the way my heart wishes them to. I hope sticking to the plan will get us to the ending we're hoping for, and that I wasn't meant to *break away* from the plan and follow my heart to achieve victory."

Gil's face becomes contemplative as she thinks of her reply. "How could you possibly predict if rushing in was going to work out? Are you supposed to believe in the *lowest probability scenario* just because it's the *positive* one? What if the chances of victory are *less than a*

percent? And what if, as now, we simply have *no metric* to measure the odds? The enemy's intelligence is *good.* They *knew* that the kingdom didn't care enough about our tribe to stop them from using it as a foothold. I suspect the king has some kind of plan... some *horrific plan,* which our tribe will be *sacrificed* to realize… and considered a *small price to pay* for all their *pieces* to fall into place. If a hero such as you can help us out of your own *kindness...* we will owe our lives to you."

"It worries me that the very underhanded kingdom you speak of is the one meant to train me in two days' time. Consider your teaching me the basics of elemental magic to be a part of my *back-up plan,* in case I'm terribly wrong about the kind of story this is."

Chapter Nine: Just Communication

Sariah was having the best morning of her life.

Everything was clicking into place, like a chess game with both sides working together against some higher evil. She had the words for everything she wanted to say as soon as she wanted to say them, and Baika was *listening.* She was *asking questions,* listening to the *whole answer,* and asking *follow-up questions.* She was apologizing for misunderstandings caused by her imprecise language, and resolving conflicts of understanding through further dialog--then becoming *excited* by resultant coordinance.

Sariah never felt rushed, so she took her time--spoke slowly and thought about what Baika might not know, or what she herself might not realize is hard to understand. Baika was so patient that, for the first time, Sariah found *herself* apologizing for being misunderstood, too--knowing that she would've found the right thing to say it if she'd thought about it more. It was easy for Sariah to get 'lost in the weeds,' as Monk used to say. In order to understand something perfectly, she'd spend a lot of time considering it from different angles--never feeling like she was close to understanding yet the breadth of meanings which others seemed to pack into their communication and understand intuitively.

In just these few hours of conversation, she felt she'd learned more about the nature of her communication than in the last three years. It was like she'd been frozen in place by remaining in the same environment with the same people. Within mere days of stepping outside, she'd met someone so much more capable of advancing her communication skills that she was having the best conversation of her life.

By the time the girls had come to rest under a tree together just beyond earshot of the others, their conversation had gotten intensely personal. Sariah had experienced electricity in her brain like never before (enhanced by the high from the psychic drugs) as she navigated the correct responses to Baika's emotional story about the death of her village. Her concern over not saying anything unnatural lead to the unnatural thought process of carefully planning a lingual translation of her sympathy. It seemed to work out fine, and Baika even seemed to come away from her story with a smile on her face despite tears in her eyes. It was a face which Sariah had no prior reference to understand, but had set her heart aflutter. She could take any amount of effort to choose her words perfectly if they might lead this girl to smile that way.

Neither girl had been sure at what point it began, but both could sense the depth of their connection--the strange way that everything they said seemed to flow into one-another better and better because the solutions were so clear so quickly. They shared an inner sense of what could be built between them if they worked together so well--how their interlocking intentions could lead to quicker advances for both of them, or even give new perspective on what they already had that could evolve their understanding of it.

It'd also gotten difficult for either of them not to recognize some mutual attraction. Sariah had been excessively complimentary, and Baika had appreciated all of it. Likewise, Baika went out of her way to express how impressed she was with much of what Sariah said, and with the depth of her knowledge. She alluded to Sariah's beauty unflirtatiously, but Sariah was not ignorant of what subtle communications could be categorized as flirtations--her ex had always been excited to teach her things like that.

Sariah was already becoming attached to this girl like she'd never known she could've been with her ex. It was suddenly painfully obvious how much more strained communication had been between them, and how easy it could be with someone who really understood. Even if she could only ever have Baika as a friend, she knew she had to treasure that friendship; but if she could have the chance to express to Baika *physically* what the *sight* of her stirred inside, then she might never wonder again why the future is worth fighting for.

She certainly wasn't going to leave it in the hands of fate. Her ex's words filled her head, and she realized for the first time how that girl had always been preparing her for the future--how she'd known from the start that they'd only ever be a fling, but wanted to do what she could with Sariah while they had the chance. In the end, she'd helped Sariah more than she'd ever seemed to appreciate; and yet, for the first time now, Sariah was happy that she'd been *left* before. She was finally sure that she had a chance at something better.

"Baika... I feel strange asking this, because if someone asked me for no reason, I would consider it invasive..."

"Curiosity is a compliment! Not a lot of people have ever really asked me about myself. It always seemed like they think they know me just by looking."

"Well, *I* can't tell by looking, which is why I *have* to ask... are you a *lesbian?"*

Baika's face went completely red. On the one hand, she was relieved that this obvious hanging tension was being addressed without having to do it herself--but now she was being asked the one question she didn't have an answer to.

"U-um--it's okay if you don't have an answer. I can find another way to ask..."

"N-*no*, *i*-it's fine. I just have to *think about it..."* Baika took a moment. "I've never looked at another woman before and felt the way I did when I looked at *you*, but... I don't know *how to say it* without reading into it..."

"You'd never met eyes with a woman who was *obviously* attracted to you?"

Baika's face went even redder, as what had began as a nugget of feeling and grown into a suspicion overnight was finally confirmed as truth.

"My friend *Exia* was always flirty with me, but it seemed like she just thought of me as a *sex object* because of my chest... we were both into the same guy, and she seemed to want us *both* to be with him together just for fun, but... I was *serious* about my feelings..."

"You were in love with Takuma?"

Oddly enough, this time Baika felt her face soften. Hearing her love described in such clear *past-tense* made it sink in just how distant those feelings had already become--how momentary their existence had already seemed. It was suddenly easy to approach those feelings from that distance.

"I'd lived in Evermiir my entire life. I'd truthfully only gone more than a *mile* beyond the border a couple of times--to visit the Southern Capital, which *terrified* me as a kid; or when I helped to fight off the pirates. Everyone knew from the start that I was Magi-Knight Chrom's daughter, and the one who specialized in physical fighting. My sister Baila was always serious about her training in magic, so we kind of had a reputation as the powerful, well-trained daughters of the village's Magi-Knight protector. I knew all of the other kids because I trained with them, but... maybe just because I lived in that big house on the hill, and my dad was an outsider, and my sister was so serious, *I* just became all of those things too.

"Takuma looked at me differently. *It..."* she blushed again and had to take a moment, realizing what she was about to say. "It's kind of embarrassing to admit... that I *wanted* to feel this way, but... the men in the village who lusted after me were obviously *intimidated* by my strength and by who my father was. None of the boys my age thought they *deserved* me, because I could *beat them up*--but *I* didn't care about that. Takuma looked at me like he thought he *could* have me if he wanted me. He looked like he *might* decide one day to take me instead, if I made him realize how I felt. But once he got with Exia, my only *hope..."*

Baika was almost ready to cry as she realized how many layers of emotions she was peeling back, forming words to make sense of the last month of her life.

"It's terrible, but I *knew* that Exia wasn't going to follow Takuma on his journey. She's *always* felt indebted to the town because she was left there as a baby and raised by the whole generation of the village's parents. Even before the town was destroyed, I was *already* hoping to follow him... I thought I could make him forget about Exia and *fall for me* instead. Once the town was gone, the only thing carrying me through the heartbreak was that my *plan* had basically come to fruition, without me even having to make a choice and deal with the consequences of it, or get *turned down* if he didn't want me there..."

"But in the end, he *did* turn me down. He'd turned me down from the start--and the last thing he wanted to add to his conscience was that he *ran into the breasts of a young girl* to deal with the pain of what he'd caused. I realized I was nowhere near enough to help that man... the best I can do is to offer my services to this stage of his narrative."

"Maybe not *him..."* Sariah began in response, "but you are *more* than capable of healing a fractured heart."

Sariah locked eyes with Baika directly, and Baika was floored--suddenly and nakedly framed in the face of such intense passion for herself, and succumbing to the comfort of knowing its existence.

"I won't ask you to never be vague. It can be difficult to be honest to your intentions, or even to understand them. However, if you promise that you'll always try your best to tell me the truth and to help us both come to an understanding, then I promise I will always do the same with you. *That* is the friendship that I desire from you at the core."

"I promise," Baika replied, almost choking up and crying.

"I promise too. Baika, inasmuch as I understand the concept, *I am in love with you.* By this I mean that *I have a desire to pursue a relationship together*. It is my preference, in the name of maintaining ease of communication and based on my own emotions that it be a *monogamous* one. I will always work to make you comfortable in our relationship, but I want to be clear that *I want to perform sexual activities with you.* In the long run, I hope to do *so many* sexual activities with you that they exceed the number I've *imagined possible* so far. I will not *ask* you for sexual intercourse--I will simply *inform you* now that I am ready and comfortable with having it at whatever point you feel comfortable doing it. *Ah*--not to put the ball entirely in your court or anything--I understand that sex usually arises *naturally--"*

Baika's expression shifted all over the spectrum of embarrassment, until finally exploding into laughter at the end. Sariah blushed, realizing how oversensitive she was starting to sound, and laughed along with her. A moment later and in a blur, Baika threw herself forward and embraced Sariah, kissing her and knocking her back into the grass.

"We can talk more about that when we get to the inn... but *yes.* Yes, *I want to be with you!"* Baika said. The girls smiled and kissed, stared at one-another through wet eyes, and knew that their lives were about to change forever in wholly unexpected ways.

Chapter Ten: The Southern Capital

Cresting the hill which brings the Southern Capital into sight, I realize the many questions I should've thought to ask about this world. Questions like, *"why can't I go to the capital by airship?"*

It seems like the first thing you'd ask once you see the five or six *giant magic boats* hanging in the airspace, coming and going from the extremely vertical steampunk city. Naturally, the question springs from my throat on sight.

"There are less than thirty airships in the world--half of them owned by the Balamor kingdom--and they've only got ports in the world's six biggest cities. Their constant usefulness is *integral* to maintaining the nation's economy," Gil explains.

"Fat lot of good the *economy's* gonna do them when *Yog-Sothoth swallows the universe!"* Takuma complains.

"Takuma..." Sariah begins with a huge breath, preparing to drop a seismic idea. "Perhaps you haven't considered this, but at the power level you'll eventually reach to conquer Yog-Sothoth, your experience of *time* will fundamentally differ from a regular human. The need for you to move *'quickly'* has less to do with the long-term ambition of your power, and more to do with the forces which attempt to *quell* you at each stage. From the perspective of the people on this planet, the terror of the universe's end is *countless lightyears* away.

Major disruptions in the economy may have long-term ramifications for the kingdom, which are *avoidable* by forcing *you* to take a walk. Perhaps things would be different had there been word of the village's demise beforehand--but considering you were the first to leave and you came straight here, word of the town's demise has likely only *just* reached the capital on horseback."

"I'd say that's an *astute analysis,"* I mumble, half-paying attention by the end. Actually wrapping my head around the higher-level scientific ideas of what I'm trying to accomplish in this

story remains out of my depth--I'm much more excited by the increasingly massive-looking walled city we're encroaching on.

The Southern Capital has expanded Eastward from the sea that forms its Western border for hundreds of years. Six massive building-like structures tower over the rest of an already huge city for the era. Each of those buildings has a huge hole in it where the airships dock, and cable-like tunnels linking the upper parts of the towers down to areas all over town. It's obvious these commuter tubes are the ventricular system of this three-dimensional city; people live at the base of this great technological tree and work in its branches, while only specially-trained forces man the ships themselves. At least, that's how I interpret what I see.

Fields of farmland begin where the houses outside the main walls peter out, and there's plenty of people working outside the city's walls, or migrating to and fro in horse-drawn carriages. It's a city bursting at the seems with commerce--such that I imagine it'll eventually swallow even more of this farmland and necessitate further advancements in transportation to sustain such a dense population once food importation becomes necessary. The way money must be flying in and out of this city, and with Balamor's bull-headed mindset towards advancement, there's almost certainly extensive study going into crafting a land vehicle.

My never having heard about the airships is especially egregious in light of how much else I've been told about the technology in Balamor's advanced cities. Part of how my relationship with the nation's government began is that I proved my having come from another world by explaining the energy sources which we'd harnessed in order to advance our population. Living in a universe with extant magic had caused these people to fixate on magic as the means of technological advancement; however, as I learned from Gil, magic power is exhaustively difficult to generate. It takes a lifetime of practice to use the highest-level spells, and most of them are meant for momentary use.

"The technology which allows the airship to fly involves the bottom deck of each boat housing thirty top-level air mages, maintaining perfect concentration in twelve-hour shifts," Gil explains. "It's such a *waste."*

"How so?" I ask. "Isn't this what's allowed them to advance so far?"

"Advance towards *what?* They don't *know* the effects of such massive, sustained mana depletion; and their only ambition is to *expend* as much of it as possible in getting wherever they want to go as fast as possible. And where do they hope to *end up*, anyways?"

"Alright, *Princess Mononoke,* how do *you* think they should live, then?" I ask.

"In *harmony* with all of the elements, of course! An *all-rounder* can develop enough understanding of *each* element to enhance their lives in *countless* small ways on a day-to-day basis. Living *in-tune* with magic and nature feels *effortless* and *free*--like you're operating *as intended* within life's mechanism."

"Does *everyone* who pursues the path of harmony end up that way?" I ask.

"Well..." Gil has to think about her position for a moment. "It could be said that only people who can *recognize* the benefits of this way of life have ever *attempted* it. But those of us from the village who've been envoys to the outside world have seen that people struggle with an *ennui* in this kingdom which doesn't come to *our* young. *We* don't struggle with our identity, or finding place in a society we aren't sure is *just."*

"Do you find this living pure for its lack of struggle? Surely there's nobility in suffering for the sake of trying to *build something* that takes everyone to the next level, right?" I ask.

"Of course! It's a nobility I *well* understand--we've *given our all* to advancing our understanding and trying to spread it. We can't do it *alone,* but if we can get *enough people* to look at the world the way *we* do, we could figure things out *so* much faster..."

I decide not to respond that the kingdom of Balamor probably feels the same way. I'm sure she already understands that, and I don't want to rile her up.

"Let me not suggest a lack of respect for your people and their ways--I can tell from how you talk about them that your people would *never* leave an ally to rot just so they can advance their own agenda faster. I'm sure I'd *rather* go to help them than to take my time here."

It had taken our group two days to make it to the Southern Capital. In that time, Sariah and Baika had somehow instantaneously become a couple. Sariah had unceremoniously asked Gil if she could ask me if we'd be comfortable trading rooms, and I of course agreed (though flabbergasted). Gil had insisted on letting me have the bed harder than I could insist that she did, and I was glad for it the next morning, realizing just how much I'd gone overboard in beating myself up these past few days.

When we'd hit the road the next day, we seemed to naturally split into groups of two, and Sariah wasn't shy at all about holding Baika's hand. To be honest, I was kind of trying to keep them out of mind, because the eroticism of even seeing two girls that beautiful interact, much less so bashfully, was overloading my nutbladder.

In yesterday's late afternoon and today's morning, Gil had taught me some of the basics of Signal magic. I'd already learned basic spells in more aggressive elemental categories, but Gil considered Signal magic to be the bridge into the all-rounder thought process.

“It's the least-understood magic in the Balamor kingdom,” she'd explained; but the most-understood by the Grigarious empire which had invaded her hometown. Signal magic takes advantage of the brain's ability to understand and be influenced by non-lingual ideas. A powerful signal user will be able to transmit an understanding to another person more completely than any words or artwork would be capable of conveying.

The Grigarious empire was built on the back of a powerful cabal of signal magic users maintaining tight grip on their nation's culture and ideals by bombarding them with signals constantly. Signal magic isn't impossible to resist, and a free-thinking individual can understand how the signals are meant to effect them and reject their premise--but the likelihood of becoming radicalized to the ideology of a powerful signal user is extremely high for anyone without that kind of self-awareness, or who receives their messages from birth.

"The problem is their mages only care about signaling with *their own species*. They know *nothing* of plant or animal magic, and have *desecrated* their home country with industry to the point that they'll have to fill the lands they conquer with their *refugees*. One day they'll turn the world into a *machine*,which only exists for the people *pulling the levers* to have *absolute power* and live as they desire. Everyone else will be *ground up* to *power* that machine. *This* is why you need to understand *ALL* of the categories of magic before you start deciding how to run the world. We need *ALL* of these things in equal measure. When you put it all into attaining just *one*

at the expense of all else, you'll forget those other powers were *even accessible* to you--and your life will be that much *less complete."*

Gil's sounded like she'd memorized the exact wording of her teachings and considered them to be the clear state of reality. Whether she's right or wrong about the nature of things, I'm far more empathetic to her people's way of life than I am to either of the warring kingdoms. I also know that I have the power to seriously effect the landscape of this world's politics; and I'm terrified of how complex the ramifications of using that power could truly be.

As we finally cross the town gate into the street, I'm struck by the wholly different energy of the place as compared to Evermiir. It's bustling--people are everywhere, going in all directions, and the housing situation is more complex than it seemed from a distance. It's like the town was built over itself again and again, with generations of houses and buildings existing right in a line, teaching an incomprehensible history of urban development.

When we come upon the entrance to one of the sky-cable tunnels, I understand these things are *fucking massive.* Each one consists of two huge left-and-right tunnels, and a smaller, lower tunnel behind a padlocked door, all within a huge cylindrical structure. Near as I can tell, the two larger tunnels are magical conveyor belts transporting people and supply crates to and from the skyports above. Based on the way the ships apparently work, I'd guess the middle service tunnel is full of mages taking shifts day in and day out to power these epic escalators.

"I hope I get the chance to spend some time here later," I muse, more impressed and with more questions flooding my mind about the setting than I'd been ready for.

"The castle is a straight shot down the central road," Gil instructs.

"Let's head there right away. I want to know *what I'm doing* before I try to rest."

To be honest, I hadn't needed to be *told* that the castle was straight ahead, since it looms unmistakably on the horizon. Smack in the middle of the city between all of the towers stands an impressively huge stone castle encompassing the hill onto which it's built. Its sloped design tapers straight into the city streets below, making it feel like the entire town is built on a warped road leading to the castle at the top.

Reaching the base of Castle Hill, the ingenuity of its construction surprises me. They've just about gutted the hill the castle was based on, and converted it into the ground floors of the castle building. The staircases running up the sides of the hill go past the open gates of the first floor to another set of gates on the second, and so on for four floors.

"The base floors of the castle are typically open; any military or government job passes through here on a daily basis. The actual royalty in charge of this place are in the castle above, inside an indestructible box. Getting in and out is *very hard,"* Gil explains.

We join the currents of people hurrying through the busy bottom terminal of Castle Hill. As we step inside, we're quickly greeted by a chirpy woman in a bright red military uniform who somehow detects us instantaneously, yet continues walking alongside us and gestures for us to continue moving as well as she asks who we're here to see.

Glancing around to get a grasp of the situation, I can identify a movement pattern among the rapid bodies. No one is stopping--as soon as anyone enters, a red-uniformed girl is walking next to them. Once she knows what they're there for, she directs them in the way they need to

go and assigns them a letter, so that at each stage of their progress through the building, other receptionists can track their letter and know exactly where to send them next. Then, the ladies in red hurry back on paths they've left for themselves to the entrance and help the next person coming in.

"This is one *very specific* high-level application of signal magic," Gil explains, as we head for the far end of the room toward a short and tight spiral staircase to the next floor. "First, you have someone using *Infrared magic* on a *massive* scale to *ping* the locations of everyone in the city. This *map data* is transmitted to a powerful Signal magic user, who then *imprints* an understanding of the map into the heads of the receptionists. Each of *them* is using *all* of their brain power to *instantly* interpret and transmit that data lingually. If they seem *impossibly* efficient, it's because they're not using *any* of their brain to think for themselves. They are *gears* in a *machine."*

"Signal magic sure is *spooky,"* I muse, as we round the top of the staircase.

"Only when you let it become a *one-way street."* Gil says.

As we emerge into a bustling array of people streams heading in and out of various cubicle-like spaces, a receptionist approaches. Taking a cue from the people who'd been approached just before me, I call out my letter, *"A!,"* and am told to head to room *D15.*

As we enter a nearly-bare little office space, a long-bearded wizard of an old man in a red tunic doesn't so much as look up from the array of documents on his desk, to which he rapidly adds marks in a sporadic fashion with a fountain pen.

"I'm not *abreast* of this appointment," he grumbles in a hurry. It takes me a second, but I can tell I'm being expected to give the most efficient response possible.

"I'm *Takuma.* Sent by *Chrom* for magic training."

As the words *"Takuma"* and *"Chrom"* leave my mouth, the wizard's head jerks a little--and then he blinks in recognition, as if hearing those keywords had pinged some database in his mind, and now he was glancing at the search results.

"I see. The Evermiir report came in this morning. You are here faster than anticipated. *Tomorrow at seve- AM,* we will meet at--"

"AH!" I interrupt, anxiety springing from my throat, "is there no one who can start training me *right away?* I only have *20 days* to prepare."

The mage doesn't respond, but glances up at me, and I suddenly feel something *enter* my mind. I can best describe it as an understanding--like I've been granted a kind of empathy for his perspective. *He wants me to reflect on the fact that I have no idea either what my magical growth rate might be, how advanced I can actually get in that time frame, or even if it's humanly possible to gain enough strength to fend off Akida. There isn't yet a rule understood saying that I'm the only hope the universe will ever have; it's possible that I'm a lost cause from the start. Occupying one of the nation's top mages for 20 days is serious business. They want to inspect the investment first. If it's worthwhile, the difference between 18 and 20 days of training can't be known. They want to rush cautiously and not recklessly.*

I don't like the logic. *Obviously I should have the best possible chances, and I want to be able to help the Jimbali as soon as possible. What if my growth rate is exponential, and I could do that in two days; but will be made to take four? What if those extra days are the only push I*

need? I conjure these feelings to mind and attempt to recreate the sensation which the signal had given me and to project that myself. With a flash, I feel the transmission leave my mind--and the wizard seems to understand. His response is very clear, and he isn't shy about letting everyone in the room feel it*: the Southern Capital is not concerned about the liberation of the Jimbali people. They are only interested in helping me on the terms most beneficial to them, and I can do whatever I want after that.*

My anger at this sentiment must read through my energy, because Gil tugs on my shirt, and then sends a signal into my brain herself. It's a feeling of resolution--*the continued dedication to do whatever's necessary to make it to the end of this, even if we don't have the authority or power to do it on our own terms.* I simply nod, and lead my squad out of the building, through the human currents, and back into the streets of the capital.

"Well, we've made it, gang. Training starts *tomorrow*, so I guess we've got the night to ourselves. There was a nice-looking inn and bar just down the road, so I'm thinking we shack up there if y'all still wanna *stick together."*

"My mission is still to assist you as best I can. You will need someone with a thorough understanding of psychic abilities in addition to traditional magical training," Sariah says.

"I wish I could've taught you more myself," Gil says, looking a little downcast. "I worry they'll *only* try to teach you spells that expend as much *destructive power* as possible--and *little* of the ways of balance."

"I might *need* that raw power in the short term, though," I say.

"Maybe. But the Jimbali magic is *not* about learning progressively harder and more explosive spells--it's about *communion* with the all-knowing multi-verse. We still *don't know* how that power could manifest in a psychic of your caliber."

"To be honest, Gil, I hope you won't stray too far, and that you'll continue teaching me when you can. I get the feeling these people aren't going to give up more than their usual *ten-hour workday* to train me, and I have no interest in *free time* while my life is on the line."

"I will stay in town. Many envoys of the Beastmen tribes are in this city, including fellow Jimbali. I'd like to go see them tonight, to be sure they're okay and learn the news."

"Let us keep you no longer, then," I interrupt. "I'll hear back from you tomorrow."

"Thank you, Takuma." She bows her head. "I look forward to working with you from here on out." And with that, she makes a nimble leap clear onto a nearby first-story rooftop--turns to flash a thumbs-up, and then leaps away from sight.

"Springy little one," I mumble.

"Um--to tell the truth," Baika speaks up, "I think I have someone to search for as well. If the report they got was from the usual person, then that would be my *cousin,* Randall, who I've visited in the city before. He can give me an *update* on Evermiir."

Just as I'm about to offer to join her, I suddenly feel another signal in my mind--this one closer to verbal communication than the impressions from the signal magic. It's Sariah reaching me through our psychic connection.

"You don't need any more reminders," she seems to say. "*Enjoy yourself. Find someone fun to spend the night with. "*

It's clear Sariah intends on going with Baika. She seems to anticipate it becoming an emotional scene. On the one hand, I also want to know what's going on with the friends of mine who survived; but I certainly agree that having *new images* put into my head isn't going to get me to sleep tonight. *"This is your last chance before the training begins,"* Sariah suggests. *"I left some drugs in your backpack. I recommend cross-pollination."*

Chapter Eleven: More Fun Than The Same Old Existentialism

For the twenty minutes it takes to make it to Randall's house, I follow Baika and Sariah while smoking through another cigar of psychic weed. I meet Randall briefly, but sense powerful ambivalence radiating behind the brief smile he shows me. *Perhaps Sariah saw this coming and was saving me more than I realized.* I break off pretty quickly--and as it settles in that I'm alone now, I set about aimlessly wandering the town for three straight hours.

I see all kinds of living. In the evening, there are parts of town that read scary and too quiet--too dark and with too many shifty figures littering the streets. Other parts of town are just as bustling as earlier--only new everyone is drunkenly swaggering slowly down the red light district. It's a town that works its people hard. If they're poor, they keep working into the night to serve the people who can afford the nights off. Those people are left with so little energy after work that they only use their expendable income to drink, fuck around, and go to restaurants--killing time, even though it's all they've got besides work.

It feels like Tokyo.

Was Tokyo better or worse for having hope and art? I once did some reading to try and get perspective on history so I could inject more realism into my middle-ages-based fantasy settings, and found myself with unresolved existential questions about the benefits of modernization.

On the one hand, everything I value about myself is what makes me an individual. I crave personal evolution; and my ultimate hope is to combine all of my influences into a cocktail no one's ever seen before and leave a distinct mark on the market, even if it's only treated like a fad. Just as long as I know I've effected the way someone thinks about storytelling and caused them to find something new, I'll feel like I proliferated the genetics of my soul. *Even if I'd died a virgin, at least I could fuck someone's mind.*

But I also can't help wondering what it'd be like to be *sure* of my purpose in a higher scheme. I've never had any religion in my life, so I don't know what it's like to sincerely think that my purpose is already written in a book; and just as vague is living in the name of the lord for the sake of a chance at heaven. Heaven had seemed totally ridiculous to me until I came here--a world in which Gods come right down to tell you why they've brought you here, and everyone is happy to follow them.

Even still, the political tendencies of my world are also alive here. Ever since hearing Gil's story, I can't shake the feeling that this world might be born from my subconscious; as though all the disconnected story elements and data points storming in my brain have solidified in a physical snapshot, and now I'm experiencing it as reality. But what pulled me into this world? Is this some uber-long hallucination I'm experiencing as I bleed out on the pavement

back at home? If so, when will I wake up? Do I get to live if I make it to the end? Do I get to die? I can't even figure out which I would prefer at this point.

It's not like I could ever prove reality was real in the first place. For all I know, this reality is realer than the one I came from. At the very least, I've been given a clear narrative path to follow, and it's comforting to follow it. Maybe I've become religious after all.

As the darkness deepens, I take a late start to the nightlife district. I'm not feeling horny or all that confident per say, but I sincerely trust Sariah's advice to find someone fun to spend the night with. If I've learned anything from stepping out of my shell, it's that you can't predict what you're going to get out of an experience; but if it's one you share with someone else, you'ill almost certainly come away with something--and it'll definitely be more interesting than the same old existentialism.

I settle at one of the smaller, dimmer, and quieter bars with more sad businessmen burying their faces in mugs than really sad sacks gargling in the laps of fake-laughing hostesses. It 's a square bar with stools all around, taking up nearly the whole space except a back wall of three tall tables that seat two apiece. It's about half-full, and most of those people are duos of businessmen still mumbling about work under their breath.

I'd had another joint on the way across town and gotten three beers deep when a just-right sense of warmth began to wash over me; and before I know it, I'm *writing.*

I don't need a pen, paper or keyboard; I'm crafting sentences in my head--making small adjustments, running over them two or three times, and then committing them to memory. First I have a solid first paragraph, and then the ideas start flowing. I give up on memorizing or writing carefully, and just let words flow in a stream, appearing in my mind's eye as on a computer screen. It sinks in that I'll never have the time to recall and transcribe this. I power into overdrive.

My thinking evaporates into the world of fiction. For however long it takes to finish my seven-page stream of consciousness, I sit, staring blankly, robotically drinking from a stein which keeps being refilled in front of me. Reading the final sentence back in my brain, I cry.

I don't know how I could publish or monetize it, being so short--nobody would probably get it, and it's nowhere near the caliber of the artists I really love--but it's my favorite story I've ever written. I hope I get to write another one someday.

Just as I'm beginning to completely disappear into my emotions, the next moment comes in startling fashion as an implaceably familiar face and voice enter my senses.

"Where have I seen *you* before?" A woman's voice cooes, flirtatiously. Facing her, my vision fills with white--it's her long white hair, open crushed velvet ivory blazer, and pale skin; the whole center of her torso is exposed and distractingly smooth. My eyes race from her face straight down through her naval and back and, I accidentally blurt out:

"It's *y--!"*

"Kyirin."

…I've been caught forgetting the name of the woman who took my virginity.

"I never ran into you again after that night, so I thought you'd left; but, I'm so glad you're alive!" I realize as I speak the significance of actually encountering her again.

"Ahaha, I *am* indeed! We *hooked up* when I was already moving out of town the following night--it was easier not to tell you. *Figured* you were going to be *out of there* eventually anyways--and maybe we'd run into each-other again. I heard about *what happened*; I only lived there for a year, but they were good people. It's a *tragedy."*

"I *caused* that tragedy," I blurt without thinking, having accepted this outlook.

"Oh, *hush!* You don't have to blame yourself for someone taking revenge out on other people. That man's got a *black heart* through and through."

I'm surprised to hear this girl come to such sure conclusions about a situation she's only heard about secondhand--but it seems like she just wants to cheer me up. When I think about it, she's basically just told me she always hoped to run into me again. *Is she trying to say she wants to hook up again tonight?* It's certainly the kind of energy coming off of her.

"Tomorrow, I'm going to start training with the Magi-Knights to power up my magic--and with my new travel companion to power up my psychic abilities. It's nothing but a desperation ploy to max out my stats as much as I can before Akida comes back to kill me again. Seems pretty silly when I say it out loud, since it could just as easily be a lost cause."

"Even if it *is* though, there's no sense in having a *negative outlook,* right? You either win or you die--so *win!"*

I smirk at her suggestion, starting to remember what she'd been like--what kind of conversation we'd had the night we hooked up, and what our sex had been like. It was all this brand of sophistry-laden flirtation--as if she wants me to feel like pleasuring ourselves together is the *smartest* thing to do. *The path of least resistance.* Of course it's tempting; almost *too perfect* in construction. I've enjoyed my time with her before--*why not again?*

But for all that's transpired, it's only been a week since I shared a bed with Exia; and that time was incomparable to the time I'd spent with Kyirin. Sure, it was just my first time--sure, I later had time to develop feelings for Exia; but after meeting this woman again, I understand it's *more* than that. My love for Exia springs from the feeling that we only stand to *gain* by being together--that our mutual presence *energizes* us both and moves us to action. We don't *have* to have sex to have a good time.

This woman treats conversation facetiously--as an indulgent game of foreplay. She's *fair*--she'll make you cum, because she wants you to make her cum too. But when I fuck Exia, there's a desperation on both of our parts to make the *other* cum, even if *we* don't get to ourselves--and of course we make sure we do.

That kind of intimacy has rendered sex ineffective as a motivator or a comfort in and of itself. What I've had with Exia is a new baseline, and I know that trying to mimic that intimacy with someone I can't truly connect with will only make me feel desperate and pathetic.

"You're right. More than myself, there are people I want to protect now. I'll have to dedicate every day to trying to make that possible," I state.

"You sound so *grown up,* haha," she says.

"Well, y'know, I *am* in my late 20s."

"Eh?? You mean you're *younger* than me?? But you've got so many *grey hairs!"*

"Yeah; and I also tried to *kill myself-!"*

This pang of dark humor doesn't seem to hit right with Kyirin. She seems to catch on that I'm working towards rejecting her.

"Well, if the *training* gets rough and you need someone in town to *talk* to, I'll be around."

"I truly appreciate it," I say.

I really do. She doesn't seem to have any bad intentions. It's possible I'll end up crawling to her once I'm pumped up with testosterone from training. But for now, we trade smiles as she leaves the bar, and then I have one more drink before stumbling through the night--until I crash, bleary-eyed, into the bed I reserved at the inn.

Chapter Twelve: Empire Is Temporary

When I show up at the training grounds in the morning, I'm surprised to find all three of the girls waiting for me. Even hung over I've made it here early, and it seems they all have things they want to tell me as soon as possible.

"Randall had corresponded with my father, and both had gotten word from the psychic monastery about Sariah. Father told me to stick with both of you for now, at least until he sends another envoy to the city to check our progress." Baika seems especially excited at the chance to remain in proximity to Sariah--possibly not even having considered the fact that she might be asked to come home until she received her father's correspondence. Her face grows a little more downcast as she admits, in addition, "there was also... *a list of survivors."*

"I'll want to hear the names *tonight,* then," I respond quickly. I suspect the ones I *don't* hear will be emblazoned on my consciousness.

"Today *I'm* here to spectate the training," Gil announces. "I'll be watching from a distance to see what kind of *theory* they'll be following with you."

"Likewise," Sariah concurs. "As per your previous suggestion, my training will take over as soon as theirs ends each night. For now, I will see what they teach you for myself."
I don't know what kind of ninja techniques these girls intend to employ, but I don't doubt they have them.

As the hour approaches, the girls all seem to disappear down the road, assumably taking up tables near windows in nearby buildings or something. Eventually, the old red mage that I spoke to in the office yesterday arrives, looking just as haggard and serious as ever.

"I am *Magi-Knight Fratha.* For today, I intend only to *assess* the state of your magical abilities and your capacity for learning magical concepts. If we can prove you're *worth* training, then we'll send you to the *battlegrounds* on the Western boarder to be interned by General Blaidos tomorrow morning."

"Wait, *what?* What do you mean you'll send me to the *Western capital?* I don't have *time* to travel cross-country! I need to be ready to defend myself in less than *three weeks!"*

"By airship, it is a mere *day and a half* to the Western capital."

"And *a day and a half* in which I may have the potential to grow my power *exponentially!"*

"You had *better!* By our calculations, that's the *only* way you've got *any* hope of winning. But it's just the same--if you grow exponentially at a rate that we think *could* protect you from town-scale destructive power, then you'll be able to do it in *ten days."*

"Then let us begin training *now,* supposing I can! Dump me if I *don't* improve in two days!" I argue furiously.

"Boy, do you know what it *means* for a *Magi-Knight* strong enough to train *you* to dedicate *two whole days* to it? Every *second* of this *frivolous* conversation can be marked in *stock market decline* for this city!"

"No, in fact, I *don't* know what it means; so why don't *you* tell me what it means for *me* to be sent to train under one of *them* on *battleground* instead of a *training ground?"*

Fratha sighs, clearly thinking of the loss he's about to incur wasting time explaining the most basic current events to some ignorant child. "Balamor is currently *at war* on the Western border to unify the small countries neighboring it for participation in *state-of-the-art society."*

"You're *invading them,"* I spit.

"And we *need* them--with their resources we can *defend* this great civilization from the *existential threat* of the Grigarious empire."

"So you want *me* to get supercharged fighting for you on the frontline of *your invasion*, and *then* use the mana resources of *all* the land you steal to launch enough *fireworks* at Grigarious to *destabilize* them. Fuck it, *I'm out.* Fuck your *kingdom*, fuck your *town*, and fuck *you."* I about-face amid my string of insults and storm away from the training ground.

"Impudent child, how much must you ask of us to have your way?!"

I stop, only half-turning in furious retort. *"You* speak of *impudence?* I may be a footnote in your kingdom's history, but in the civilizations I'll be *saving* at the end of your spacetime, your puny monarchy will be *long forgotten!*" I continue walking.

"Where do you think you're going?!"

I stop and turn again to respond. "It's obvious to me that this training *won't* allow me to reach the level I want to. Lower-deck magic even at its *best* just can't compare to psychic ability; and they can't *truly* be combined without the balance preached by the Jimbali. I could spend the next nineteen days *raping foreign lands for their mana* to throw it at people, and I'd get no closer to understanding how to *link* that power into my psychic abilities. I'm sorry I *wasted your time."*

After that, I don't turn back around.

The girls all swarm me as I make it a few roads away from the training ground.

"What happened?? Why'd you leave?" Baika asks.

"It's *bogus,* like you said, Gil. You and the Jimbali are the *only* ones who can help me defend myself from Akida. How long will it take to reach the Beastmen cities?"

"I-it's only a day and a half trip to the north-east! B-but, are we *going* there??" Gil is breathlessly trying to keep up as I don't break my power stride to the North end of the city.

"I got a good night's sleep--how about you girls?" I glance back, and they all three blankly nod. "We'll grind as much theory on the walk as possible, train at the inn tomorrow night, and then round up anyone in the free tribes who knows anything about the Jimbali techniques and train 'round the clocks at the nearest village. I'm sure *they'll* be more serious about *saving the fucking universe."*

With a plan in front of us, we set upon our way.

Chapter Thirteen: A Change of Plans

For three days I coast on nothing but manic energy. I'm a dump truck of information, largely grunting confirmation of understanding as Gil pours endless new age aphorisms and bizarre coding principles through my ears. As I learn, I see patterns in the explanations. It's obvious that even though the coding languages are completely different, most of the fundamental principles of magic are consistent across all types. In fact, if not for the fact that each element has a consistent programming language, it'd be mostly pointless to group them into categories.

An effective all-rounder is someone who primarily studies the similarities between magical languages rather than the specific intricacies of how they work. The best way I can explain it is by pointing out how in every language throughout history, there have been words to describe weapons. Every society that's formed a language has also formed basic weaponry, and thus there are words in every language with nearly identical definitions; even though nearly every language also contains words with no direct parallel in other languages, or have completely separate structures.

Were you to boil down all of the world's cultures to their essential shared elements, and then learn the ways to communicate those concepts in every language, you should be reasonably capable of basic communication and survival any place on earth.

Similarly, there are applications for every form of magic in basic scenarios which can enhance your livelihood. Blood magic can be used to attack pathogens in your body--animal and plant magic combined with signal magic can allow you to communicate with animals on the basis of the commonalities in your experiences, and enjoy the benefits of working together.

All throughout the world, there are specialists in each of these fields--but they all have to fill in the gaps for one-another. Those at the forefront of magic research are pushing their abilities into whole new fields; but the bulk of all magic is being used just to operate a society which can facilitate that research and evolution. Meanwhile, the beastmen are capable of living completely satisfied lives by achieving magical balance.

The Jimbali have been taking a new step with their progress into psychic integration. Through their access to other dimensions, psychics can use a greater data pool to simply intuit the bulk of a magical language's intricacies after gaining a firm enough grasp of the basic principles governing all of the magical types. Theoretically, a powerful enough psychic with a firm enough grasp of the fundamental theories governing all the magical languages can process every conceivable magical formula in a matter of seconds (or, just as probably, millennia--if it turns out psychics can only be so powerful, or if magic has boundless possibilities). All of that is being explored in the current research--and I'm about to become a major part of it.

As expected, the beastmen shamans were ecstatic to have not only myself, but the monastery's previously most-powerful identified psychic also. In Sariah's initial lack of curiosity and later lack of listening in on the conversation, she hadn't actually understood what Gil had been trying to do, nor had she heard anything about the theory of Jimbali magic, until it was explained to her on the way. Naturally, she was also interested in becoming a part of the research, surmising that she can probably get powerful enough to liberate the Jimbali based on her present understanding of the theory herself, even without having bothered to glance at lower-deck magic before in her life.

Progress has been quick for us both. The circuitry of wind and water magic are similar enough that we can just guess most of one's structure after noticing so much initial similarity in the core principles of the languages. Others like infrared are bafflingly unique from the others; but when Gil asked me to "think of this like instrumental music if all you've been hearing up to now is words," I was able to find the throughline to the language's core ideas and the consistencies in their presentation as parallel to the other languages.

Sariah is particularly adept at solving long strings of advanced spells immediately after learning the fundamentals of a language. About an hour into looking at codes for fire spells, she suddenly burst into a laughing fit, slamming her fist on the table and proclaiming "you just make a bigger and bigger fireball!" That night, she demonstrated a town-class fire spell in the skies high above the village which ought to have been visible for miles around--a complete amateur using the most advanced fire spell known to man after a single day.

After launching the spell, she turned her back to the explosion and spat, "fire magic is *stupid."*

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On our fourth day in the Beastmen village of Bhazu, I wake up truly and thoroughly exhausted. Last night was a brutal gauntlet of banging my head against the wall of death magic: spells with codes which I find inexplicably torturous just to *look at.*

I wrench myself from the bed and out the door of my little personal hut, emerging onto the ever-daunting midair wooden bridge complex that one might call the *floor* of the beastman village. Beastmen are extremely agile, leaping between trees and acrobatically crossing their village without much concern for actually touching down on the wooden walkways. As a grounded human, though, living my entire life *a hundred feet* over the jungle floor keeps me anxious getting from place to place.

It seems I'm not the only one burning out: as I head towards the village's largest building, built across the support of six huge trees, I see other half-awake beastmen getting turned away at the door and told to go relax for a while and come back with more energy. Making it to the door, I see Sariah already inside, dutifully deep in meditation with someone instructing her over shoulder. Meanwhile, I get turned away for *"looking like death."*

The village guard advises that I take the long northern path down to the water fountain they've built out of a natural spring, in the side of the mountain that forms the village's North and Western borders. I do as advised, and about five minutes later have followed the straight, descending path to the foot of a fountain.

I don't know what I'm thinking anymore. My brain feels refried on death spells. As I gaze blankly into the pinkish stone fountain's perfect clear water, eventually I feel a presence approaching from behind. It's Gil, and she comes to stand at my side.

"I have to admit, I'm jealous of what you two can accomplish so quickly."

"It's just a matter of holding it all together inside your brain," I mumble, my voice sounding more haggard than I expect and prompting me to cough. I've been abusing the psychic drugs trying to accelerate my thinking as often as possible, and now my tolerance is to the point that I need a ton of it to feel anything.

"I feel little reason to doubt that my people can soon be freed, even just by *Sariah's* powers. I only hope that we can prepare you for your *own* ordeal at month's end."

"Don't worry about *me* until you're done worrying about *them*. I've just gotta keep my nose to the grindstone every day 'till it's done. Believe me, *crunch time* is nothing new for me."

"It's as impressive as it is terrifying. Even though *we* developed this magic, it has never been in the Jimbali's nature to live this kind of *intense* lifestyle. I didn't want to push the idea of training our magic on you too hard, because I wasn't sure it even *could* be tapped into with a rushed mentality--but it's obvious now that you psychics have a brand of understanding which goes even beyond what we *all-rounders* are able to accomplish."

"It's because people like us have to learn everything backwards. We don't intuitively understand anything, so we spend our whole lives obsessively collecting data, looking for patterns in that data, and then using those patterns to understand things that other people don't seem to have to think about to grasp. For you, it's *so clear* that knowing these magics to their fullest depth will *never* benefit your existence enough to be worth doing, because your balanced understanding of the elements already gets you through day-to-day life comfortably.

“But what if there was something *really specific* that you wanted to do, and there was just *one* obscure spell that could make it happen? If *no one* ever specialized in that magic, then you could never make that thing happen--and yet, it is assumed that to specialize in one magic means to spend the time that *might've* been spent gaining basic knowledge of *all* magic.

"But what if that wasn't true? What if the truth is that learning advanced spells is *just as easy* as tacking together bits and pieces of smaller spells with tons of commonalities? Just as words are built from roots that get fused and reused, so too are there not only *many* of the same words in different languages, but the same *roots.* Similar grammatical *tics* or subtle *rules;* that might not *look* the same when they're written down, but they follow the same *principles."*

"Do you think that people without psychic powers could eventually learn to use this magic?" Gill asks with a tinge of hope.

"It's really just a matter of *processing power* and *information accessibility*. Theoretically, if a *computer* were plugged into as much data as either of us is, and it had enough processing power, you could just *feed* all the spells we know into it and have a database that told *anyone* exactly what they had to do just by looking it up. Spellcasting would become as simple as *cooking*, with every cookbook in the world at your disposal--which is how things worked in my world." I explain, still staring into the falling water of the fountain as a blue flamingo-like bird dips its feet in and slurps some of it up.

"I can't even imagine such a place..." Gil says.

"It's not so great, really. People have the exact same fundamental misunderstandings about how to live *there* as they do here. One day you'll come to terms with the fact that it's almost impossible to shake someone's foundation once it's been established. If one day *everyone* learned magic like yours from birth, then you *might* have a harmonious civilization--but *children of the crunch* like me will always be compelled towards the self-indulgent experiments at the heart of evolution."

"Maybe I will borrow some of your crunch mentality then with how I set about spreading the message of the right way to live." She responds.

Gil and I trade looks and smiles before turning back to the water.

"I hope I can one day raise a daughter as intelligent and kind-hearted as you are, Gil, I say. It takes her a moment to respond, and I don't check her expression, but she says:

"Thank you."

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On our sixth day in Bhazu we meet to plan the reclamation of Jimbali village.

Last night Gil snuck in to meet with her father and confer on the possibilities. She hadn't described the state she'd found him in, but returned with a bristling energy like I'd yet to witness. She's already worked up a proposal on the way back to the village for how we can lead the attack late tonight, and everyone is feeling it.

Sariah has come so far in learning to combine spells across different magic types that she can now send out a sonic pulse to get a full mental portrait of the area every couple of seconds. We know exactly where everyone is at all times; all we have to do is craft a perfect plan and execute it flawlessly.

Dispatching the outer perimeter of guards should be as simple as sending a wave of beastman warriors at them from above. The beastmen will be completely undetectable with such clear knowledge of the enemy's movement.

Getting into the compound is a different story--the general has installed a pair of anti-air guns which can rip through the jungle's canopy in a couple minutes, likely causing major casualties and preventing a second attempt.

"No problem," Sariah says of this, standing over a 3D map made of sand which she's projecting and manipulating like something out of Avatar: the Last Airbender. "I know *exactly* where they are. I can send them into a neighboring universe's *sun."* She seems like she's chomping at the bit for everyone to agree on a plan so she can have it done in minutes.

Inside the walls are plenty of guards, but the Jimbali are confined to the cell block. So long as there isn't any reckless fire, it's just a matter of striking down the second wave of enemies as quickly as the first. Sariah has no interest in a plan of battle where casualties have any probability--she's certain that she can dismantle the enemy without even killing them.

"These people are *infants.* They only act upon programming, like *human spells,* never generating thought. *They could be as gods, but they are made to be as ants."* Sariah grows weirdly maniacal and intense, biting at her thumb as she glares at the map and taps her foot, like she's just waiting for something. I've never seen her so expressive before, and Baika almost seems to be fawning over that side of her. It's clear not only that she's changed a lot in her personality, but also that the insane possibilities being opened to her every day are driving her into an unchecked frenzy of thought. Even if her raw psychic power is possibly much lesser than mine, she has a more full understanding of how to use it which is only growing more complete through this new application. It's like watching a super hero with some kind of seemingly banal power suddenly realizing that if they use it a certain way, they can outrun the Flash.

"THERE HE IS!! CHANGE OF PLANS!!" Sariah shouts the second a certain figure appears on her map--the one she's obviously been waiting for--and in the next moment, all of us are stunned as a gigantic man wearing ludicrous amounts of heavy ceremonial armor materializes, suspended by midair crucifixion, *in the middle of the room.*

"KILL ME YOU FUCKING COWARD!!" The middle-aged, scraggly-blonde-haired warrior bellows on arrival, scaring everyone shitless, like he's felt the death that should've just befallen him and converted the rage of dying instantly into pure vitriol at the thought of being disrespected by an enemy who felt there could be any benefit to keeping him alive.

"How long you think it'll take him to *crack*, Takuma? *Thirty, forty* years?" Sariah suddenly addresses me in a cocky, indignant tone. Perhaps she's projecting a wavelength my way, because I'm quick to respond.

"I think he'll go a *piece of shit* to his *grave,"* I say.

"His choice, no*t mine."* Sariah responds.

With that, the man vanishes from sight. Sariah continues speaking without missing a beat. "I put him somewhere he can *always* live, but *never* leave. I'll check up on him every five years *if he lives.* The rest of his men have been sent back home. *See your father, Gil.*" And with the end of that sentence, Sariah collapses into Baika's arms. Gil is so stunned and confused, she doesn't know what to do or where to look, and turns to me.

I look her in the eyes and just say, "let's go."

Chapter Fourteen: Beowulf Cluster

Considering my personal distance from the events that transpired in the Jimbali village, the reuniting of the tribe is surreally tragic. We have victory--an enemy removed and families united--but in the form of those who can walk hobbling alongside the many bruised and beaten children being carried on stretchers to the other beastmen villages--away from the one they once had, which exists only in faint tatters after what the Grigarious have tossed aside.

I can't watch Gil's protracted and tear-filled embrace with her father for long. Even without a child of my own, the thought of having one and having been unable to prevent that experience existentially haunts me. I help with the transportation of wounded back to the village, where those with energy enough to stand and reunite gather 'round a bonfire with everyone they know to share stories. These, too, are difficult to hear.

Everyone comes through Sariah's bedroom to pay respects and offer healing energy. She groggily wakes at some point in the afternoon to the girl who's stayed by her side, and it seems like giving herself over to a night of acting as a vessel for the villagers' gratitude is about as much as she's up for. I slip away into the darkness to smoke a blunt and try to turn my mind back to training. After all, my own story isn't over yet.

The next morning, Sariah asks to pull me aside as soon as she sees me, and we trek down to the fountain. She speaks first.

"What I've learned from the Jimbali is to reconsider the paradigms of functionality. If reality boils down to just codes, then it's *solvable.* It's simply a matter of understanding how things function on larger and larger scales, and then imagining potential *purposes* for those functions, and *executing* the spells to make them happen. Our ability to fathom *higher stratas* of power is the product of identifying broader and broader *patterns* via countless data inputs."

"So it's just a matter of *stuffing our heads* full of everything we can learn, right?" I ask.

"No--that's what *I* have to do, but not you. *You* have imagination. If I'm like a *living computer*, then you're like a *mad scientist*. You have a tendency to see the framework of what's possible *before* you know the details of *how* it's possible. *I* can fill in the holes in your logic by checking the data; but I can't *imagine* something I don't *know* is possible based on suppositions from unclear data patterns; at least, not with the natural immediacy that you do.

I tried to act like *you* yesterday... the way Baika had described you. Someone who *acts* guarded, but *belts his heart out* in the heat of the moment. Seeing the way you stormed out of the capital, I just thought... *fuck the plan and fuck the rules.* I'm pretty sure I *can* do this, so I'm just going to go ahead and brute force it."

I can't help but laugh at such a spot-on description of the way I've handled my life so far. "You know me amazingly well for someone I've almost never spoken to."

"Well, hey--*we're all on the spectrum, right?"* She turns her head to the side and seemingly winks into the distance, apropos of nothing.

"So what's our *plan* for Akida, exactly? Just to put our heads together and learn as much as we possibly can?"

"Yes... but *more literally* than you're thinking. We need to form a *beowulf cluster."*

My mental jaw dangles as I realize what she means. If we open a back-and-forth signal magic path over psychic frequencies, we might achieve information transfer so quick that it'd be like we were each constantly learning two things simultaneously.

It takes us about an hour to code our communication spell, and once we're wired together, I feel a whole new version of *mind expansion.*

I'm suddenly connecting incoming sensory data to memories and knowledge that I've never had before. Words which enter my mind seem to have multiple incongruent definitions that undergo a reconciliation process before reforming into new, combined understandings.

Every second it feels like Sariah and I are bleeding into one-another; and I can feel my sense of self beginning to *warp.*

Sariah's voice suddenly comes cracking through my mind, occupying so many mental frequencies as to halt progression of other thought.

"WE HAVE TO CONCENTRATE ON NOTHING BUT CODING--WE NEED TO KILL OUR EGOS OR THEY'LL SCRAMBLE INTO ONE-ANOTHER."

I concentrate everything on the flow of information and managing the processes of thought which swirl around me. I'm completely swallowed into the infrastructure of my own mind, in the same way I used to be fully sucked into my monitor when writing one of my books. Everything beyond the fiction disappears, and soon my imagination is running unchecked, just as Sariah had said. At the same rate I can imagine possibilities for magical codes, Sariah can logically justify them.

I don't know if time is passing at all while we do this--until I see the blurry, sped-up figures of Gil and Baika, who at some point come into the room, study what we're doing, and conclude that we've entered some kind of hyperbolic state of concentration. In truth, we're using gravitational magic to experience hours of calculations at the rate which they can be explained in clear lingual terms. From anyone else's perspective, I'm talking in extremely slow motion; while to me I'm talking at normal speed as Sariah completes the logic inside of every statement.

I can't track all of the blurs which smear past, and I quickly loose track of the cycle of light through the front window. If I've slept, I haven't noticed.

For what feels like a little over four hours from my perspective, I've rambled nonstop about every single idea which comes into my head while Sariah justifies every single one of my statements.

And then, in a flash, Akida appears before me.

Feeling the first ripple of air displaced by his body’s arrival, I shoot to my feet. He's coming down from above swinging an object of death toward my head--so I thrust my arms forward in counter and catch his blade between my palms.

--End of book 2